

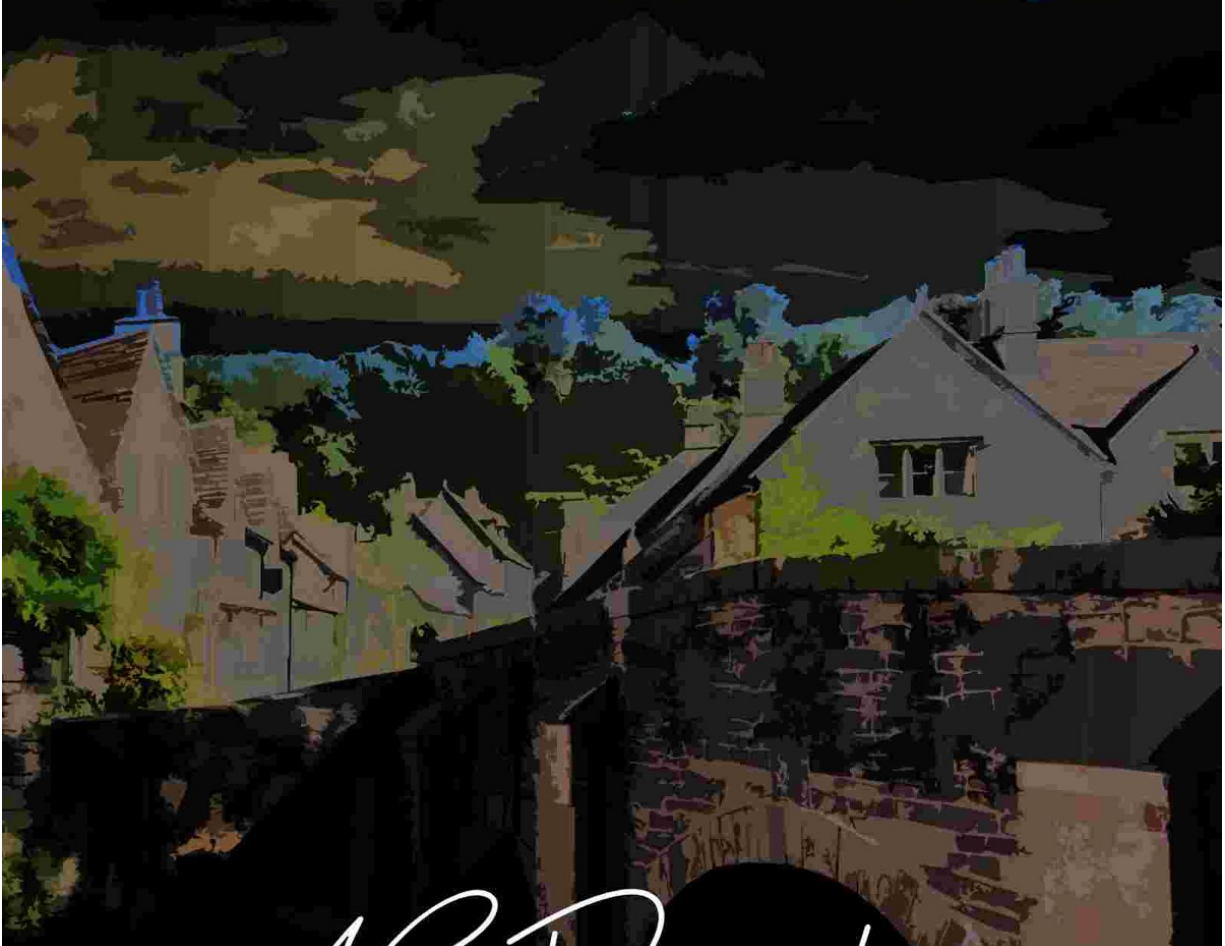
A BROCK & POOLE MYSTERY

THE FINAL GAME

AG Barnett

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BROCK & POOLE



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A.G. BARNETT



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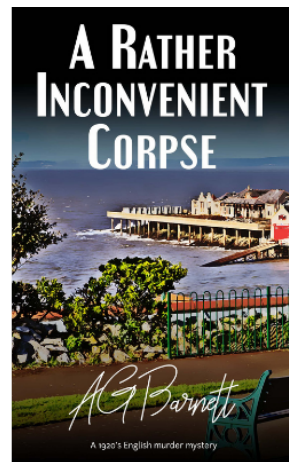
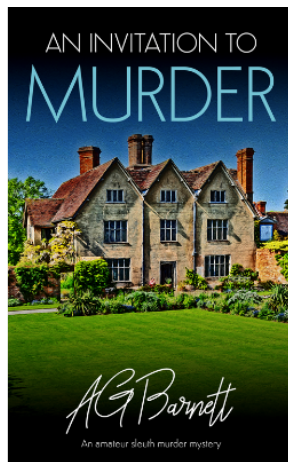
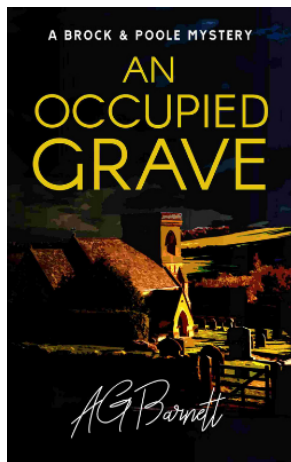
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CHAPTER
ONE

“Are you serious?” Sanita asked, her fork halfway to her mouth.
“Honestly, I’ve never played it,” Poole answered with a laugh. “I know there’s pretty much a team in every pub around here, but I just never got around to having a go.”

There was a loud cheer from a group of people at the far side of the busy country pub where they had just had dinner. It was reciprocated with moans and shouts of anger from a group facing them from the other side.

The place was old and worn, but not in a tired way. It was the kind of aging you got from decades, maybe centuries of good use and good cheer. The exposed beams and worn stone walls heavy with the memories.

“Well,” Sanita said, “if Aunt Sally gets this rowdy maybe you are best of out of it!”

Poole knew that Aunt Sally was a game played across the county of Addervale, and had even seen a game or two in pubs, but the whole thing still seemed strange to him. The “Aunt Sally” from which the game takes its name is a small wooden doll which is placed on a metal pole. Players then take turns to throw large wooden sticks at the figure to knock it off.

“People drinking and throwing large sticks around, what could go wrong?” Poole laughed. “Shall we head back after these?” He sipped at the one beer he had allowed himself before driving back to Bexford.

“Excuse me?”

Poole turned towards the voice and saw the landlord, who had served them behind the bar. He was in his mid-fifties, bald, and sported a warm grin along with his London accent.

“I know it’s a bit of cheek to ask,” the landlord continued, “especially when you’re enjoying a night out together.” He turned his smile to Sanita for a moment. “But we’re a man short for our game tonight and the other team won’t drop a player themselves. They’re saying we’ll have to forfeit if we don’t find another player. I don’t suppose one of you fancies a game, do you?” His thick London accent rose in hope.

Sanita chuckled and leaned back in her seat. “Oh, this is perfect! Guy here will play.”

“You want me to play Aunt Sally?” Poole asked, staring back at her with a look of incredulity.

“You’d be doing us a real favour,” the man answered. “I’m sure we’ll even buy you a pint or two!”

“Oh, thanks, but I’m driving.”

“I’ll have a free wine though,” Sanita laughed, pushing her glass towards the barman. “He’ll do it.”

“Brilliant! I’m Bob by the way, Bob Canter,” he said, extending his hand for Sanita to shake. “I run this place.”

“I’m Sanita and this is Guy,” she said, taking his hand. He shook it and turned to Poole to shake his.

“Thanks Guy, we really appreciate it. We’ll be getting started out the back in a few minutes.”

“OK then,” Guy said, slightly startled by this turn of events.

Bob moved back towards the two groups that had been making all the noise and watched the reaction to the news spread. Favourably with the first group, less so with the second.

“I can tell you’re enjoying this,” Poole said to a smirking Sanita, “just don’t blame me if this goes horribly wrong.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, it’s going to be fun!”

“You mean watching me embarrass myself?”

“Exactly,” she answered with a grin. “Come on,” she said, rising from her seat. “I’m going to need that wine to enjoy this fully.”

“Vanessa,” Bob said, gesturing to a young woman who was also behind the bar as Guy and Sanita approached, “get this lady another glass of wine on the house, will you?”

There was a murmuring from the group at the end of the bar which rose into cries of “What about us?!” from at least two individuals.

“Don’t mind them,” the barmaid said, taking Sanita’s empty glass. She was in her early twenties, with long blonde hair, blue eyes and a tight jumper with a V-neck that displayed a gratuitous amount of cleavage. “It’s just a bit of a shock,” she continued. “You know, hearing Dad spring someone a drink. He’s normally tighter than a duck’s arse.”

“I heard that!” the landlord called from the other end of the bar where he was trying to placate the regulars now demanding a free drink.

They took the now full glass Vanessa returned to them and headed through a low-beamed doorway, passing along a short corridor where the toilets were and out into the pub beer garden.

To the right were several tables and benches, some on the flagstone patio that extended out from the building, and others on the raised grass lawn above it that was held back by an old stone wall. To the left lay the Aunt Sally area where the opposition team gathered.

Clearly failing to gain a free drink themselves, Poole’s new teammates appeared from the bar behind them and were soon being introduced by the landlord.

The first introduction, and clearly the most important judging by how the rest of the team hung back slightly, was to an elderly man named Patrick

Susswich. He was short, stocky and had an air of someone who knew their place in life, and it was right at the top. He was the owner of Stanton House, the manor and estate which the village of Stanton-on-Mead was based around. His wife Helen Susswich was next. A willowy blonde-bobbed woman, at least twenty years Patrick's junior, with a sharp face and intelligent eyes.

Patrick's son David, with a dark flop of hair and eyes to match, gave them both a firm handshake coupled with intense eye contact. The rest comprised a good-looking, loud, and confident blond man named Henry Chambers. A young man with angular, sly features called Stuart Pike, who was the spitting image of his father John, also present. Last, a mousy, middle-aged couple named the Barretts. Horace Barrett was part of the team, but Mavis Barrett was not.

"I have such bad arthritis in my wrists these days I'm afraid I can't play anymore. I just come along for support."

"Moral support, that's why I'm here," Sanita said warmly. "Why don't we sit together and we could even get a Mexican wave going if it goes well."

Mavis gave a high-pitched, bird-like titter and the two of them retreated to a bench as Horace handed Poole a long, smooth, wooden stick.

"Have you ever played before?" he asked with a friendly smile.

"No, sorry. I'm sure I'm going to be useless."

"Nonsense," Horace chuckled. "There's really nothing to it. You just need a few throws to get your eye in."

"Let's hope so, I don't want to be the one to let you down."

Poole's name was written up last on the scoreboard, allowing him to watch the others as they played. The throwing process was similar for all of them. Heft the weight of the stick for a moment as you eyed your target, and then swing it forward, sending it spinning towards the wooden doll which sat on its metal perch ten yards away. Horace talked Poole through

the various happenings with an almost reverential air. Poole thought young Stuart Pike had scored with his first throw, but was then told that knocking the doll off by hitting the metal pole was called an “Iron” and scored no points.

Patrick Susswich was clearly the team’s best player. His short, squat frame seemed to suit the game and he scored four for the team, with his son David being the only other scorer on one.

Finally, it was Poole’s turn.

He stepped up to the line and felt the weight of the stick in his hand as he eyed the doll. He swung, releasing the stick far higher than he had intended, but watched in disbelief as it arced up into the dimming light before dipping and hitting the top of the doll with a loud crack.

There was an enormous cheer, and Poole was slapped on the back repeatedly as he gave a sheepish grin to Sanita, who was cheering, clapping and laughing in equal measure.

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CHAPTER
TWO

Brock put the padded lawn chair into the recline position and looked up at the emerging stars, deep in thought.

He heard Laura slide open the patio doors behind him. “You OK?” he asked.

“Yes,” Laura replied with a sigh as she sat heavily in the seat next to him, her right hand moving to her pregnant belly and stroking it absentmindedly.

He turned to look at her and couldn’t help but smile. In the early stages of pregnancy she had experienced waves of nausea, insomnia and a temper that had frankly scared the life out of him. Now though, they were within a week of their due date and her skin seemed to glow, her hair shone and although her eyes were still ringed with tiredness, he thought she had never looked so beautiful.

She smiled back at him. “Feel,” she said, taking his hand and placing it on her belly.

Brock’s large hand jumped slightly as he felt the kick immediately.

“Ha ha! I love it! She’s going to be strong as anything, this one,” he said, chuckling, aware his eyes were wet with emotion.

He wasn’t sure if it was the changes at work or just the enormity of parenthood, but the rush of feelings that left his eyes misty and his heart

clenched had been increasing recently. He'd even welled up at a TV advert for coffee the other day.

"You're so gooey-eyed for her already," Laura laughed. "You're going to be such a pushover when she's older."

"Let's not talk about her getting older already," Brock answered as he leaned back in his chair. "I want to enjoy the part where I only have one sharp-tongued female bossing me about for a little while."

"She'll be bossing you around before she can speak, don't you worry about that," Laura said, smiling. "Anyway, it's easier for you to look forward to the baby stage, you're not the one about to have your nipples torn to shreds twenty hours a day."

Brock winced. "Yeah, fair enough."

"The car's still making that funny noise, by the way," Laura said.

"I know, I'll get it in the garage this week."

They sat in silence for a while before Laura spoke in a soft voice.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah, of course."

Another period of silence followed. This one was heavier.

"I just want you to be sure you're taking the job for you, and not for us."

She caught her mistake as he sighed and corrected herself before he could reply. "I know you are doing it for us to an extent, you know that. I just mean it has to be coming from you. I don't want you resenting me, us, for this in the future."

"You know I wouldn't," Brock grumbled.

"Not intentionally, I know," she said, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"I know what you mean," Brock said. Shifting in his seat so that he faced her. "This is my decision, though. I've seen enough, done enough. It's time to use all that experience to make things better for the new lot." He laughed. "By that, I mean I'm old."

“I got it,” Laura said, smiling.

“Seriously, though,” Brock went on. “It’s the right time.”

“Good,” Laura said, reaching out and squeezing his hand. Brock leaned back in his chair again.

“And what about Guy?” Laura asked innocently. She couldn’t see his face, but felt him stiffen at the question.

“He’ll be fine.”

“Oh, I know he will,” Laura answered. “It’s not him I’m worried about.”

Brock inhaled deeply. He wasn’t sure if he should be pleased how well his wife knew him, or annoyed. She was certainly right here.

He knew Poole would be OK, even if he was going to be paired with Anderson with budget cuts preventing more experienced detectives coming in. It wasn’t that he was worried about his decision to take the promotion to chief inspector. Not that much, anyway.

The truth was, Poole had become an important person in his life. They had been through a lot in the short time they had known each other. Not just at work, either. Poole had become one of the family in a way.

True, Brock had been his boss since he had known him, but now he would be the chief, and that was a whole other ball game.

Chief inspectors didn’t go for drinks with the men. Well, they did. Whenever someone retired or had a birthday. It was always an awkward, stilted affair, and even old Tannock had the excellent sense to leave after one drink so everyone else could enjoy themselves.

Laura becoming pregnant had been the best thing that had ever happened to them, but it was going to change everything. The new job would too.

Letting go of his friendship with Poole might just have to be another change.

CHAPTER
THREE

“I’m sure it was just beginner’s luck,” Poole laughed, his cheeks rosy with a mixture of alcohol and pride.

“Nonsense!” Patrick Susswich bellowed, slapping him on the back for what must have been the hundredth time that night.

It was Patrick who had insisted on Poole and Sanita getting a taxi home, negating their need to drive and allowing them to be plied with drinks, which he had insisted on buying for the entire team, who were now all suitably merry.

“I’m just glad we won,” David Susswich said. “It’s been a while, I can tell you! Guy, could I have a quick word?”

Poole rose and followed David to a corner of the pub, away from the team. The team being the last of the clientele still present.

“Guy,” David said, putting a hand on his shoulder, “it was great of you to help tonight.”

“Really, it was no problem.”

“The thing is, it seems as though we’re going to be a man down for a while on the team. I wondered if you’d consider joining us, for a while at least?”

“Oh, um...”

“You’d be doing us all a big favour.”

“Right, well I guess I could.”

“Excellent. Knew you were a splendid chap as soon as I met you.”

There was the sound of voices rising from behind them.

“And just where the bloody hell are you going?!” Patrick Susswich roared.

Poole turned to see the older man, bright red with rage as he stared at Henry Chambers.

The rest of the group had fallen silent at the sudden outburst and so Poole heard the younger man’s reply.

“You don’t need to worry, everything’s in hand.”

“You’ve been saying that for weeks!” Patrick snarled back.

Helen moved across to him, placing one hand gently on his forearm.

“Come on darling, I think it’s time we went home.”

Patrick turned to her, his face instantly softening.

“Yes, of course, dear.” He turned back to Henry. “I expect to hear from you soon, Chambers.”

“Of course, Patrick,” Henry said with a broad, square-jawed smile.

Patrick gave him one more hard stare and then turned to leave with his partner.

“Excuse me,” David said, as he moved to follow them. “I’d better see if the old boy is all right.”

“Of course,” Poole answered, before moving across to where Sanita stood talking to Mavis Barrett.

“You OK?”

“Yeah,” Sanita answered with her slightly lopsided grin. “Nothing like a bit of drama, eh?”

“I’m sure it’s just a minor disagreement,” Horace Barrett said from his wife’s side. “You know how it is, a few drinks and things can get blown out of proportion.”

David Susswich was leading his father and stepmother out through the main pub doorway, his arm around the older man's shoulder.

"Sorry about that, everyone," Henry Chambers said, turning to them all with his loud, rich voice. "Just a misunderstanding. I'm going to have to get off, I'm afraid, and I'll be away for a little while, but I hear my replacement is all sorted for the team?" He raised an eyebrow at Poole.

"I've said I'll come and play, yeah," Poole said, noting the grin from Sanita. "I'm not sure how you knew so quickly though, I only just said yes to David."

"He and I cooked it up while the game was still happening," Henry laughed.

"Never one to miss a trick is Henry," Vanessa added from behind the bar.

Henry flashed her a quick smile and a wink before downing the last of his pint. "See you all in a few days."

Their group watched him move towards the door when David Susswich reappeared through it. The two men paused for a moment and exchanged words, but in voices too low for the small crowd that watched to hear.

"Sorry about all that fuss, everyone," David said with a warm smile on his return.

"We wouldn't want anyone to cause a fuss now, would we, David?" Stuart Pike said, the youngest member of the team's words slurring as he spoke. "All got to be nice and respectable, haven't we?"

There was a heavy moment of silence before David replied.

"I think you've had enough, Stuart," David replied. "Don't you?"

"And I suppose you'll use your high and mighty influence to stop me getting served?"

"He won't need to," Bob said, moving from around the end of the bar. "Come on, lad, let's get you home." He looked back over his shoulder as he led a scowling Stuart away. "You'll be OK, Vanessa, won't you?"

“No problem, Bob,” the barmaid called back, a wide smile on her cherry-red lips.

“I think that’s probably enough excitement for us for one night,” Poole said. He leaned on the bar and looked at the young barmaid. “What’s the best taxi firm to use from here?”

“You’ll want Finnan’s. Only one that comes out this way.” She pulled a business card from beneath the bar and leaned across to pass it to him. Poole did his best to avoid the copious amounts of cleavage that this presented to him as she smiled and twirled her long, blonde hair around one finger.

“Right, thanks.”

He turned back to Sanita, whose one raised eyebrow seemed to ask a question of him. “I can see why she’s popular with the customers.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Poole said, raising his chin and affecting an air of innocence.

They said their goodbyes and were soon feeling their way through the narrow, moonlit country lanes back to Bexford in a taxi.

“What did you make of all that then?” Poole asked as they sat in the back seat together, Sanita’s head on his shoulder, her hand in his.

“Mavis and Horace were sweet. I talked to Helen Susswich a bit as well. She wasn’t what I expected at all.”

“How so?”

“Oh, it’s just me being judgmental, I guess. You know, older, wealthy man with younger, beautiful woman.”

“Sanita Sanders!” Poole said in mock shock. “Are you suggesting that poor woman is a gold digger before you’d even got to know her!”

She laughed and punched him playfully on the arm. “I know, I know. Anyway, she seemed nice. She’s quite ambitious, though. Sounds like she has big plans for their estate that her stepson doesn’t exactly approve of.”

“Oh?”

“She wants to turn the place into a luxury spa and hotel.”

“Don’t they live there?”

“Yeah, but she wants to turn it into the business and then move somewhere ‘a little more modern,’ as she put it.”

“I can see why that would annoy David. He was telling me about his family history there and seemed pretty proud of it. What did you make of all the fuss at the end?”

“Oh, I’m sure it was all a mountain out of a molehill,” she said, as she snuggled her head into his chest. “Why don’t we go for a walk around there when we pick the car up tomorrow?”

“Sounds great,” Poole said, smiling down at her in the dim light of the taxi.

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CHAPTER
FOUR

“We might as well leave the car here,” Poole said as the taxi dropped them off on the road by The Finch, “the pub’s closed anyway, so I’m sure they won’t mind.” He gestured to his car, which sat alone in the car park.

“OK,” Sanita said, taking his arm, “Let’s go explore.”

The village of Stanton-on-Mead straddled a small and shallow river, which wound its way through the heart of the cluster of buildings. It was pretty, and the warm breeze and chorus of birdsong gave Poole the impression he had stepped onto the set of a film.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Sanita said, as if reading his mind.

“It really is,” he answered. “Would you want to live somewhere like this? Out in the country, I mean?”

Sanita laughed. “If it means I’m less likely to be called in to help Mum and Dad with the restaurant, then yes.”

Poole smiled, but he realised with a pang through his gut that he had actually meant the question. He wanted to know what she wanted from life. He wanted to know if he was going to be part of it.

“Actually,” he said, stopping halfway across the grass they were crossing to get to the river. “I’m sort of serious, actually.”

Sanita frowned. "Are you asking me to move to the country with you?" she said playfully, her lopsided grin making his heart kick up its rhythm a notch.

"No, I guess I'm just wondering what you want," he said awkwardly.

She moved closer to him, putting her slender arms around his waist. "I want you, you idiot. And I don't care where we live."

She kissed him awkwardly because of his wide grin, and they continued walking.

"I love the countryside, though. Just look at last night. Our first night in the pub and look how friendly everyone was. Well, apart from the Barretts."

Poole gave her a questioning look. "I thought you and Mavis were chatting all night?"

"Oh, we were for most of it. Then I told her what we did for a living."

"And?"

"And she went white as a sheet and clammed up straight away. Hardly said another word to me, not that it mattered. I'd drunk two glasses of wine so I could have talked for England at that point."

"Strange, though," Poole said thoughtfully.

"Oh, here we go." Sanita laughed. "You're going to suspect Mavis Barrett is a master criminal now or something, aren't you?"

"No!" Poole laughed. "I'm just saying it's a bit odd."

"It's not though, is it? I get it all the time. It's one reason my love life has been such a disaster. People get nervous around police. Even if they're innocent, they get nervous."

"Um, excuse me," Poole said, stopping and holding a finger in the air. "Your love life has been a disaster *until now*."

"Oh, of course!" she said, smiling and rolling her eyes. "Now it's like a fairy tale."

He raised an eyebrow, and she turned away, laughing.

The sound of raised voices caught his attention from behind. He turned and saw on the far side of the green that two people had emerged from the small village shop. He recognised the tall figure of Helen Susswich and her partner's son, David.

"I don't care what you say," David was saying. "It will not happen. You will not come in here and ruin everything my family has worked so hard for!"

"David," Helen answered calmly, "I am telling you, it is not my decision."

"Ha!" David said, throwing his arms up in exasperation.

Before he could say any more, a Range Rover pulled up alongside them. Poole couldn't hear what they said next over the engine noise, but Patrick Susswich was driving. Helen climbed in and his son did not. As the vehicle pulled away, David shook his head as he looked after it before looking up and noticing Poole and Sanita watching from across the green.

He gave an awkward smile and wave before jogging across the road towards them.

"Hello, what are you two doing here?" he asked as he reached them.

"We came to pick the car up after last night," Poole answered. "We decided to have a walk around the village."

"I don't blame you." David smiled as he looked around. "Beautiful, isn't it? This place has been my family's home for over four hundred years."

"Wow," Sanita said, "that's incredible."

David's half smile faded into a frown. "Sadly, it may not last."

"Oh?"

He shook his head and smiled again. "Oh, just being melodramatic! Thank you again for last night, you really helped us out."

"Oh, no problem."

“I’d better get going, but if you have time, the pub does a pretty decent breakfast. See you next week.”

They said their goodbyes and continued to the river’s edge.

“I wonder what all that was about?” Sanita asked.

“Sounds as if there’s some tension between David and his father’s girlfriend.”

“I’m not surprised,” Sanita said quietly.

“Oh?” Poole asked, surprised. “You mean because of the age difference?”

“Don’t start that again, I’m open-minded enough not to make judgments about things like that, thank you very much.”

Poole laughed. “OK, sorry. What then?”

“I didn’t speak to Helen enough to make much of an opinion of her, but everyone else in the village seems to hate her.”

“Really? She seemed nice enough.”

“That’s what I thought, but before they went cold on me the Barretts said that people didn’t like the idea of her swanning in from London and playing the role of lady of the manor.”

“Even though she sort of *is* lady of the manor now?”

“I know, I think it might just be because she’s an outsider.”

“They were nice enough to us,” Poole said as he bent to pick up a pebble from the ground before skimming it across the river.

“Yes, but we haven’t moved into the big house and made all the peasants uneasy, have we?” she said playfully, before her face became serious.

“So come on,” Sanita said. “How are you feeling about it all?”

“What?” Poole asked innocently, avoiding her gaze.

“You know what. Brock moving upstairs, you being paired with Anderson.”

Poole sighed. He'd been trying not to think about it. Not that he was burying his head in the sand or denying it was happening. It was more that every time he thought of it, he developed a knot in his stomach. He and Detective Inspector Sam Brock had been through a lot in the relatively short time they had been working together, and it felt right. Like home.

Now Brock would be the new chief inspector and Poole was being paired with Sergeant Gavin Anderson. A blond, muscled bully who had hated the sight of Poole since he'd met him. They had begrudgingly reached a place where they were at least civil to each other, but it was unlikely they were going to be friends any time soon.

"I'm not really sure how I feel about it all," Poole replied honestly. "I guess I'm just going to see what happens."

"Well, I don't think you need to worry about Anderson being a problem. Brock will make sure of that." Sanita laughed that tinkling laugh of hers that Poole loved so much. "Thinking about it, it could be handy having the chief inspector as a friend."

Poole smiled, but found it hard to share in the joke. If he was honest, his biggest fear in all this was that he and Brock could no longer be friends.

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CHAPTER
FIVE

“Well, this is cosy, isn’t it?” Brock said with a forced smile.

He leaned forward on his desk and looked at the two men in front of him. They really couldn’t be more different.

Detective Sergeant Gavin Anderson was a tall, broad, strong-jawed young man who carried an air of confidence that Brock had always felt was above his abilities.

Detective Sergeant Guy Poole was of a similar height, but had a physique which suggested he was made out of golf clubs. Long-limbed with an innate clumsiness and a mop of hair which made Anderson’s immaculate crew cut stand out even more.

“I think we need to have a little talk about how things are going to work from now on,” Brock continued. “You two are both good detectives, but you’re still relatively inexperienced and as you know, normally you would have partnered with a more experienced officer. Budgets being what they are, and believe me, I’m having to learn a lot about them already.” He muttered these last words as though someone had invented the idea of budgets just to test him. “So I want to be clear: for a good while I want you to involve me in your investigations. I want to be informed of everything.”

He watched them for a moment. Anderson could barely hide his annoyance at the idea that Brock would check up on them, while if

anything, Poole looked relieved.

“That doesn’t mean that I’ll interfere, though,” Brock continued. “I just want to be informed so I can provide help if you need it. This is going to be new for all of us, so I hope we can all have some patience with each other while we figure out how it will all work. You both OK with that?”

“Yes, sir,” they both answered in unison.

“We’ve got one week before all these changes kick in officially, and there’s one thing we need to address before they do.” He waited to see if either of them would say anything, but both men stared back at him with blank expressions. “You two have some previous grievances, and the air needs to be cleared. You two are going to be partners, and that means trusting the other man with your life if necessary.” Both men shifted in their seats.

“You’re going to go for a drink, just the two of you, and sort out whatever’s lingering between you.”

“Sir, I’m not sure—” Anderson began, but Brock raised one large finger to silence him.

“I’m not interested in what you think right now, Sergeant, I’m interested in what you do. Both of you need to sort things out between you, and that’s an order. Now. off you go.”

They shuffled out of the office and moved down the corridor towards the main office in silence. It was only when they emerged into the less confined, larger space that they paused.

“So when do you want to go for this drink?” Poole asked without looking at him.

“I don’t want to go for a drink with you,” Anderson answered, his gaze remaining as resolutely forward as Poole’s was. “Ever, but I will, because I have to.”

“Ignoring the snide in your tone, you’ve got a point,” Poole answered. “Neither of us wants this, but it’s the way it’s going to be, so we might as

well get on with it and make the most of it.”

There was a moment of silence between them as they both considered this.

“I’ve got myself roped into an Aunt Sally match on Saturday,” Poole said. “I’ll probably need some Dutch courage before that, so you could meet me at the pub beforehand?”

“Aunt Sally?”

Poole felt Anderson’s eyes turn to him and moved to meet their gaze. “Yes, you know it?”

“I love it,” Anderson answered in a matter-of-fact voice. His expression had been plain and honest, but as he saw Poole’s surprise, his reaction hardened into his usual hard guardedness. “I’ve played it before is all I mean.”

“Well,” Poole said, feeling as though he’d just witnessed a chink in otherwise impervious armour. “Maybe we could practise before my game, you can help me warm up?”

“All right,” Anderson answered after a moment’s pause.

“Right,” Poole agreed, unsure what else to say. “I’ll email you the details.”

They stared at each other for a moment longer, and then turned and headed off in different directions without saying goodbye.

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CHAPTER

SIX

“Good luck,” Sanita said as Poole kissed her lightly before climbing out of the car.

“Thanks,” Poole answered, leaning back into the car, “I think I might need it.”

Sanita smiled. “I’ll be back in an hour or so. Get me a wine ready, I’m getting a taxi.”

“Will do.”

Poole watched her leave and turned to the pub with a sigh. An entire hour in the company of Anderson wasn’t something he relished, but he knew it was necessary. They had been butting heads from the moment he had arrived in Bexford, and it was time to move on.

He headed through The Finch’s low doorway and saw, with surprise, that Anderson was already there, lurking at a table in the corner with his hand around a pint, his eyes fixed on the door. Poole nodded at him and headed towards the bar.

“Oh hello, Guy,” Bob Canter said, the landlord’s face a picture of welcome. “You’re early, aren’t you?”

“He must be keen!” The barmaid Vanessa smiled as she dried glasses at the far end of the bar.

“I’m just meeting a friend,” Poole said, glancing towards Anderson.

“Oh,” Bob said, his tone hardening. “Your friend said my beer was cloudy.”

“Ah,” Poole said. “Well, when I say friend, I really mean acquaintance.”

Bob smiled and poured him a beer. Poole paid and made his way over to the table where Anderson sat watching him.

“All right?” Poole said as he took a seat opposite the hulking figure.

“OK,” Anderson said flatly.

There was a moment of silence that seemed to drag out for hours until Poole couldn't take it anymore.

“Shall we just cut to the chase and work out why you've always hated me so much?” he said in a sharp tone.

Anderson frowned at him as Poole waited for the barrage of insults which never came. Eventually, Anderson straightened and looked Poole in the eye.

“Before you came, I was the one people thought was on the up. I was the one they respected.”

“And you think I came in and stole all that from you?” Poole said in disbelief.

“I think you came in and stole Sanita,” Anderson fired back.

Poole opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. As he studied the square-jawed face in front of him, for the first time he didn't see the arrogance and confidence that normally shone from it. Instead, he saw pain. Genuine pain. He realised with a jolt the truth that he had been blind to since they had met. He had assumed Anderson had seen Sanita purely as a conquest and had merely been annoyed with Poole for removing his prize from the game. Now though, he realised. Anderson actually cared for her.

Before he could respond, they were interrupted by a newcomer to the pub who had been served behind them and had now made their way to their table.

“You're here early,” Stuart Pike said as he took a seat without asking.

“I was just catching up with my friend here,” Poole said, nodding towards Anderson.

“All right, mate.” Stuart nodded at him. “You here to watch our star Aunt Sally player, are you?”

Anderson looked at Poole in shock. “You’re their star player?”

“I’ve only played once! Just last week. I think it was beginner’s luck.”

“Where’s your lady tonight then?” Pike asked.

Poole glanced at Anderson in time to see his jaw tighten. “She’s coming a bit later.”

“Actually, Guy,” Pike said, lowering his voice and leaning towards him. “I was wondering if you’d heard anything about this golf course proposal.”

“Golf course?”

“Yeah, the one up at the manor. I thought being official, you might have heard something?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it, sorry.”

“Oh, OK,” Pike said, leaning back and standing up. “Forget I said anything, I’m going to have a chat with Vanessa.” He winked suggestively and moved away.

“I’m a professional,” Anderson said, apparently oblivious to the interruption and continuing their conversation. “I’ve got no problem working with you.”

“Right,” Poole said, unconvinced. “That’s good.”

You’re not in charge though,” Anderson continued. “I don’t care if you’re Brock’s golden boy or not. We’re the same rank.”

“I’ve got no problem with that,” Poole answered levelly. “We’ll need to work as a team.”

Anderson gave a small, humourless laugh and lifted his pint to his lips.

The door to the pub opened and the distraction of Patrick, Helen and David Susswich arriving saved them from the next gaping silence.

“Why don’t you stay for the match,” Poole said. “I’ll introduce you to the team.”

He watched Anderson wrestle with the idea, his normally wooden expression flickering for just a moment.

“OK, I will.”

“Great, come on then.”

He led them towards the bar where David Susswich was standing, apart from his father and mother-in-law.

“So you’re a policeman as well?” David said after the introductions. His dark eyes seemed a little darker today, and Poole could feel a tension coming off him that hadn’t been there before.

“A detective sergeant, yes,” Anderson replied stiffly.

“I don’t suppose you two would cover a theft from someone who’s clearly lost their mind, would you?” David said, raising his voice.

“Um...” Poole answered before Patrick Susswich spoke over him.

“That’s enough, David,” he hissed.

His son looked at him fiercely and then turned back to the bar, downed his drink, and gestured to Vanessa.

“Another please, Ness.”

She gave him a worried smile and began pouring as Mavis and Horace Barrett arrived.

“Evening all,” Horace called as they approached the bar.

“I think that’s Guy’s line as the team copper,” Bob joked from behind the bar, causing Vanessa and Poole to laugh. But there was no such appreciation from the Susswich family, who all appeared to be brooding.

“Oh, hello, Guy,” Horace said as he reached the bar. His initially warm smile fading slightly.

“This is my friend Gavin,” Poole said, indicating Anderson. It was the third time he had referred to him as a friend, and it wasn’t feeling any more natural. “And this is Horace and Mavis.”

The three of them said hello before Horace turned to the bar to order drinks.

“So are you here to cheer us on tonight then, Gavin?” Mavis asked.

“I like Aunt Sally,” Anderson replied blankly.

“Oh,” Mavis said, slightly unsure of his answer. She glanced at Poole, who gave a little shrug. “Well, that’s good,” Mavis finished.

“We work together,” Poole said, already regretting introducing Anderson as his friend.

“Oh,” Mavis exclaimed, her hand rushing to her mouth, her eyes wide.

Horace turned towards her from the bar. “Here’s your drink, dear.”

Mavis grabbed it from him and took a long slurp of her white wine.

“It must be very interesting, your line of work,” she said.

“It has its moments,” Poole answered, frowning slightly.

Horace’s eyes darted between Poole and his wife for a moment before they landed on the pub door. “Ah, the other team has arrived, I see!”

They all turned to see a group of men and woman enter, a short, balding man leading them with a worried expression. David Susswich moved to greet them.

“So, how are you doing in the league?” Anderson asked, causing Poole to look at him in shock, which he duly ignored.

“Oh, not too bad,” Horace replied. “We’re a bit of a permanent fixture in mid-table.”

They looked up as David Susswich approached them.

“Seems like they have the same issue we had last week, they’re a man down.”

“I’ll play for them,” Anderson said quickly. They all turned to him.

“That would be great, if you don’t mind?” David replied.

“I’d be happy to,” Anderson answered.

“Great, that’s all sorted then,” David said as he clapped his hands together and turned to the bar. “Come on then, Bob, let’s get all these good

people a drink and then we can crack on with the match!”

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CHAPTER
SEVEN

“You can’t!” David Susswich roared, his face red with fury.

The rest of the pub fell silent at the sudden explosion of anger, all eyes turning to David’s tall, dark figure which stood opposite his father and mother-in-law at the bar.

“I’m free to do as I please,” his father Patrick replied in a voice that was raised enough to ensure their new audience heard his words.

“Are you?” David laughed. “Is that what she tells you?”

“You’re making a fool of yourself, David,” Helen said with a smile.

“No, Helen, it’s you who’s making a fool of my father.”

Poole and Sanita had been stood in rapt silence with the rest of the customers, but now he saw movement from the corner of his eye. It was Anderson, leaving his new victorious teammates and heading towards the arguing family. Poole moved, without thinking, to join him.

“Is there a problem here?” Anderson asked, his chest puffed out even more than usual. Poole winced internally at the cliched, hard man act.

Helen’s eyes gleamed as she looked Anderson over and then glanced at Poole.

“My son-in-law has just had a little too much to drink and is a little upset,” she said smoothly, “I’m sure there’s no need for the police to get involved, is there, David?”

David stared at her, his eyes alight with rage, before suddenly turning to the still quiet crowd.

“It’s not just me this affects, you know,” he said loudly, “I think the entire village should know.”

“David,” Patrick said gruffly, “this is hardly the time!”

“Oh, I think it’s exactly the time,” David snapped back at his father before turning to the room again. “Helen has persuaded my father to sell the estate and move to London.” There were audible gasps and murmurs around the room. “And worse than that, she’s already lined up a deal with a luxury hotel chain to take the place over.” Now the crowd began muttering, and Poole noticed some choice swear words in amongst it.

“What do you think,” David continued, “that’s going to do to your little village, eh?”

“Patrick and I don’t exist just so this village can feed off us like leeches, you know,” Helen sneered.

“Our family has been part of this village for generations!” David roared.

“Then it seems like it’s high time it moved on.” Helen smiled.

David turned and marched out of the front door of the pub, the door slamming only accentuating the silence that followed. It was broken by Stuart Pike.

“What happens to me and my dad if you sell up?” he said from the bar.

“We’ll discuss all of this at the right time,” Patrick said, taking his wife’s arm. “Come on, Helen, I think it’s time we went home.”

“Oh, I don’t see why the evening has to be spoiled just...” Helen Susswich stopped in mid-flow, her eyes widening slightly as though something had just occurred to her.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, turning to her husband, “Let’s go.”

It was only after they had left that the noise in the pub grew to more normal levels again.

“Bloody hell,” Bob Canter said as he leaned forward on the bar, his hands clasped together in front of him.

“This might be good news for the pub though, right?” Sanita said. “A big hotel nearby would have you packed most nights.”

“You think someone coming to stay in a swanky Manor House hotel is going to come here?” Bob said glumly. “They’ll have a fancy bar and restaurant set up and the only time they’ll come into the village is for a walk.”

“They can’t just get rid of us, can they, Dad?” Stuart Pike asked his father John.

“They can do whatever they want,” John answered before draining his pint. “It’s their house,” he added grimly.

“It won’t happen,” Vanessa said from behind the bar. “Patrick would never leave Stanton House, you know how he loves the place.”

There was a general murmuring of agreement, but Poole felt that the heart of the group wasn’t in it.

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CHAPTER
EIGHT

“So how did it go?” Brock asked, his eyes searching Poole as though he was a suspect.

“Um,” Poole said before pausing, unsure how to answer.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Brock grunted. “You didn’t get into a fight or something, did you?”

Poole leaned back in surprise. “Well, I wouldn’t call it a fight as such.”

Brock sighed and put his head in his hands. “Go on then. You might as well tell me how my new detective partnership has fallen apart before it’s even started.”

“Wait,” Poole said, leaning forward again, “I don’t mean that Anderson and me were fighting.”

Brock looked up in confusion, and Poole explained.

“The village where we were playing is a bit tense at the moment,” Poole continued. “The local landowner is selling up and it’s got everyone a bit riled.”

“And it caused a fight?”

“Not a fight, but the whole evening sort of fizzled out. We’d been playing Aunt Sally and...”

Poole paused as Constable Dan Davies skidded to a stop next to their table, wobbling dangerously before he steadied himself.

“Bloody hell, Davies,” Brock said. “What are you dashing about like a lunatic for?!”

“There’s someone on the phone for you, sir,” Davies spluttered, his eyes wide.

“Well, take their details and tell them I’ll call them back,” Brock said in a slow, patient voice.

“He’s furious, sir!” Davies said desperately. “And he keeps asking if I know who he is and that he knows lots of people who will make sure I am giving out parking tickets for the rest of my life.” The gawky young constable had added this last in a tone that suggested he was repeating it word for word.

Poole waited for the inevitable reaction from Brock, and when it didn’t come, he turned to him. He had been expecting the big man to bark back, that he wasn’t going to rush around for someone who spoke like that and that he’d call them back. Instead, Brock had a thoughtful look.

“Did this man give a name?” he asked.

“He’s called Patrick Susswich, sir—”

“Patrick Susswich?!” Poole said in surprise.

“Yes, sir, it’s his wife that’s gone missing,” Davies answered.

“Sir,” Poole said, turning back to Brock. “That’s the owner of the Manor House I was just telling you about. He’s on my Aunt Sally team!”

“I didn’t know you had an Aunt Sally?” Davies said, looking confused. “And this bloke’s on her team?”

Brock sighed and heaved himself out of his seat. “Put it through to my office, we’ll both take it in there.”

“OK, sir,” Davies answered before scampering back off the way he had come.

“What do you know, Poole?” Brock said as they made their way to his new office.

“Not a lot, I’ve only met the family a couple of times.”

“But there was quite a lot of tension last night?”

“You could say that. Patrick Susswich is selling up, and it seems like it’s going to affect everyone in the village.”

“And what about his wife?”

“Everyone seemed pretty clear the move was down to her. She doesn’t seem well liked.”

“Right,” Brock said as he opened his office door, his jaw tight.

The phone was already ringing, and he pressed the speaker button before slumping into his chair.

“Mr Susswich?”

“Finally!” a voice barked from the small speaker on the phone. “I’ve been on hold for almost ten minutes!”

“I’m very sorry about that, but we’re here now, Mr Susswich,” Brock said. “You’re speaking to Chief Inspector Brock and Detective Poole is on the call as well. I believe your wife is missing?”

Poole was glad he had taken his seat, because he certainly needed to be seated to witness Brock being this civil to someone who seemed as angry and rude as Patrick Susswich did.

“Helen.” Patrick’s voice came back, now quiet and small. “She went out to walk the dog this morning as normal, but she hasn’t come back and then the dog came back on its own.”

“Have you looked for her?”

“Of course I bloody have! Did the whole route she takes and never saw a thing!”

“Did you take the dog with you when you looked for her?”

“What? No. What on earth’s that got to do with anything? I want to know when you’re going to get over here and do something!”

“We’ll be there in the next hour,” Brock answered. “In the meantime, please stay at home in case your wife returns.”

“Fine,” Patrick answered. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how difficult I could make life for you if you don’t take this seriously.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” Brock answered before hanging up.

Poole looked at him with eyebrows raised.

“New job, new act to play,” Brock answered as he rose from his seat. “I’ve no idea who this pompous git is, but no doubt he knows people in high places. They all do, don’t they?”

“Ah, so this is the new Brock, is it? Running around doing what the gentry says?”

For a moment, Poole thought he had overstepped the mark, but then a thin smile appeared across Brock’s broad face.

“I’m just finding a line in the sand, Poole. I don’t want to get off on the wrong foot, do I? That said, if you ever notice I’m playing golf more than I’m in the office, you have my permission to hit me over the head with your baton until I see sense.”

“Thank you, sir,” Poole answered enthusiastically with a salute.

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CHAPTER
NINE

The Manor House was smaller than Poole had expected. The way people in the village had talked about it, he had expected an enormous, sprawling pile of stone. Possibly with turrets.

Instead, the manor was more of a very grand house. More modern and discreet than he was expecting. The grounds surrounding the house, though, were impressive. Wide, rolling green land stretched away in all directions, meeting woodland in the distance and encompassing a tennis court and various ornamental ponds.

He glanced across to Brock as he pulled up at the end of the long, winding driveway. He was pleased to see the look of annoyance on his boss's face. Order had been restored.

“Nice, isn't it, sir?”

“Oh yes,” Brock grumbled, “must be lovely to inherit something like this.”

Poole tried to hide his smile.

Before they'd even closed the car doors, Patrick appeared at the door of the house with his closely cropped white hair and a matching length beard. He jogged down the wide steps at the front of the house with surprising agility for a man of his years.

“Are you the police?” he asked, as he stopped in front of them.

“I’m Chief Inspector Brock and this is Detective Sergeant Poole.”

“I don’t care who you are other than to report your names if you don’t find my wife pronto!” Patrick shouted. It was only then that his expression changed from one of fury, to one of confusion as he turned to Poole.

“Guy?”

“Hello, Mr Susswich,” Poole said, deciding that formality was called for.

Patrick was momentarily flummoxed and stood there with his mouth hanging open until his son appeared from the door behind him.

“Guy, thank goodness,” he said as he joined his father.

“This is David Susswich, sir,” Poole said to Brock, who nodded at the dark-haired man.

“I think it might be best if we go inside and you tell us what happened,” Brock said.

David nodded and turned to his father. “Come on, Dad,” he said quietly, but firmly.

Patrick looked as though he was going to resist, but then his head sagged and he nodded before turning towards the house. They all followed him in to the large hallway and through a door on the left which led to a sitting room. David poured himself and his father a drink from a drinks cabinet in the corner before offering Brock and Poole one.

“No thank you, sir,” Brock answered. “If we could just get to the matter in hand, every minute matters in situations like this.”

Poole resisted the urge to look up at his superior and decided to internalise the surprise at how accommodating he was being.

“She went out for her morning dog walk as normal,” Patrick Susswich carried on in an irritable tone. “I saw her out of the front door and that was it.”

“What about the dog?” Brock asked.

“Why do you keep going on about the bloody dog?!” Patrick snapped.

“If your wife was walking the dog, presumably it had been with her?” Brock continued, not missing a beat.

“Of course it was!”

“But it’s here now,” Brock continued.

“Bloody thing came back on its own about an hour ago,” Patrick grumbled.

Poole noticed Brock’s jaw tense at the man’s lack of concern for his dog.

“I’ll need you to show us your wife’s normal route on a map and lend us the dog.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to look for your wife, Mr Susswich, and for your own good, I hope we don’t find her.”

Patrick stared at Brock, his eyes suddenly wide in fear. His son stepped forward and took his arm. “I think it’s best you stay here, I’ll go with them.”

“Right, yes,” Patrick said in a hoarse voice, his eyes still fixed on Brock.

“This way, please,” David said, gesturing them back towards the hallway.

They followed and joined him as he paused by the front door.

“Can you level with me here? Do you think something happened to her? What’s all this about the dog?”

“Mr Susswich,” Brock said. “I was being honest with your father when I said I was hoping we didn’t find your stepmother. It’s likely she lost the dog and is still out looking for it, or she could have twisted her ankle unable to get home. She might just have left, for whatever reason. In my experience, though, someone who gets up to walk a dog every morning wouldn’t have lost it like this. So yes, something might well have happened, and I think the dog might be the best way of finding her.”

David looked down at the floor for a moment before nodding. “He’s in the sitting room. I’ll meet you outside.”

Brock and Poole stepped outside and looked out across the wild expanse of the estate, which rolled out before them. Its clipped green grass, dotted with sheep in the distance.

“Something doesn’t feel right here, Poole,” Brock said in a low voice.

“You think something’s happened to her?” he asked, turning to his boss.

“It’s the dog, Poole. Why didn’t it stay near her? It might run off after a rabbit or something, but if they walk this route every day, it can hardly have got lost.”

“Maybe wherever she went, the dog couldn’t go with her?” He shrugged.

Brock turned to him with a shake of his head. “She wouldn’t go off somewhere and leave her dog! You really don’t get pets, do you?”

“I like Indy.” Poole shrugged.

But Poole acknowledged Brock’s statement was true. While he’d never understood the deep affection people seemed to have for their pets, recently Indy had thawed his stance. The scruffy, wonky-eared dog that the Brocks owned.

They both turned as an excited scabbling of claws on stone came from behind them. They turned to see David Susswich leading the dog awkwardly down the steps, holding its lead as though it were a snake.

“Shall I take the dog?” Brock asked, obviously seeing his discomfit.

“If you don’t mind,” David said, holding out the lead to him. “I never got on with dogs, I’m afraid. Badger here is Helen’s dog.”

Brock nodded and bent down to stroke the rangy black and white spaniel behind its floppy ears. Its tail wagged enthusiastically and Poole tried not to laugh as Brock spoke to it in the baby voice he always seemed to use for dogs and now, of course, to his wife’s baby bump.

He stood up with no sign of embarrassment and asked David to lead the way.

“She normally walks to the edge of our main lawns here and then goes into Forgan Woods.”

Poole looked up at the line of the trees in the distance. “And she does this every day?”

“The same route every time as I understand it.”

“What sort of woman is your stepmother?” Brock asked.

David glanced at him. “What sort of question is that?”

“I understand she is quite a bit younger than your father. I wondered whether you have a good relationship with her.”

“We don’t see eye-to-eye on a number of things,” David muttered. “Helen only really cares about one person, and it isn’t my father.”

“But they’ve been married a number of years now?”

“If you can call it that,” David said, giving a small, humourless laugh.

They reached a stone bridge which crossed a small river.

“I’m guessing this is the same river that runs through the village?” Poole asked.

“Yes, the Mead,” David answered. He seemed distracted now, his eyes scanning ahead of them, his strong jaw clenched.

They walked on in silence as they approached the woods which had appeared small until now, but had suddenly widened and loomed, dark and still ahead of them. Badger pulled forward on the lead, causing Brock’s pace to quicken slightly as they entered the woods via a narrow, but well-worn path.

“Is this a public right of way?” Poole asked.

“Yes, everyone in the village uses it, it goes onto our land, but it doesn’t go as far as the house. It runs along the river back to the village green.”

Poole felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He had never been as comfortable in the countryside as he had with concrete under his feet, but

deep woodland was a whole other level.

There was a silence to the woods that unnerved him, a silence that spoke of age and life and death. Fallen trees lay dotted around, overgrown with thick moss, while the living ones towered overhead with gnarled and knotted trunks.

“Whoa!” Brock said as Badger launched herself forward down the path. He pulled her back and bent down, taking her off the lead. She bounded forward and vanished into the undergrowth.

Brock took a deep breath and pulled up the waistband of his trousers. “I never thought I’d say this, but follow that dog.”

The three of them moved forward, away from the path and into the thicker undergrowth of the forest. Wading through thick ferns, the thorns of brambles catching at their trouser legs.

After a further ten minutes of fighting the plant life they found Badger, sat, whining by her owner’s still body.

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CHAPTER
TEN

“Someone must have had a heck of a job dragging her over here from the path,” Poole said as they watched the crime scene techs begin their work.

“No one dragged her anywhere,” Brock said, looking out into the woods.

Poole frowned and looked around them, his eyes scanning the floor. “You’re right,” he said, realising what he had missed. “If someone had dragged her here, you’d see a trail where the undergrowth had been flattened.”

“Exactly.”

“So she must have left the path on her own. But why?”

“Maybe she was meeting someone secretly?” Brock offered. “Or maybe she collects wildflowers or something? Who knows?”

Poole glanced at his superior, noticing that his face also displayed the tension he heard in his voice. He debated whether to ask what was on Brock’s mind when a familiar voice called from behind them.

“You might want to see this, Sam,” Sheila Hopkins said. She was standing a few feet away from the body of Helen Susswich, which was being photographed by another crime scene tech.

They headed over to her, being careful to skirt around the crime scene as much as possible. They stepped through another stubby fern and Sheila lifted one hand from her hips and pointed down at a long, rounded, smooth stick at her feet. One end of which was stained with blood.

“Something tells me this didn’t fall from a tree,” Sheila said.

“That’s one of the sticks from Aunt Sally,” Poole said, his voice distant. They both turned to him.

“You mean that game you’ve been playing here?” Brock questioned, eyebrows rising.

“Yes,” Poole said, bending down for a closer look. “I’m sure of it.”

“And does everyone on the team have their own sticks?”

Poole tried not to laugh. It wouldn’t have been appropriate in the situation, but Sheila clearly felt no such obligation.

“Of course they don’t!” She chortled. “They’re just sticks, you don’t get specially made ones or anything.”

“So they’d just be kept at the pub?” Brock asked, ignoring this.

“Yeah,” Poole answered. “They’re in a bucket out the back by the Aunt Sally court or whatever it’s called.”

“Then let’s get over there sharpish,” Brock said. “We’re only in the way of Sheila and her team here, and Ronald will be here in a minute.”

Poole nodded. Brock always preferred to spend as little time with Ronald Smith, the local pathologist, as possible.

They left the woods and followed a footpath which a constable had reliably informed them led back towards the village.

“What do you make of David Susswich’s reaction to finding his stepmother like that, Poole?”

Poole looked up at the scattering of white fluffy clouds above them as he thought. David’s reaction had been one of obvious shock. He had gaped down at the prone figure in silence as Brock and Poole had made the necessary, but pointless, check for signs of life. They had then turned him

away, back to the path, wanting to ensure the crime scene remained intact, where he had waited silently until a uniformed officer escorted him back to his house.

“Shocked,” Poole answered, unsure what else to say.

“At first, yes,” Brock answered slowly. “Then I’d say, thoughtful. From what you’ve told me, he won’t be the saddest person in the village to see his stepmother gone.”

“I’m not sure anyone felt much affection for her,” Poole said. “She liked to lord it over the villagers, apparently.”

“Then we won’t be short of suspects, will we?” Brock said gruffly. “First things first. I want to see if there’s one of these sticks missing from the pub, and I want to see who could have had access to it.”

“I can answer that now,” Poole said. “Pretty much anyone.” Brock glanced at him and he continued. “The pub garden backs onto a field and there’s only a low wall separating them. Anyone from the village could have jumped over the wall and grabbed one of them.”

“Great,” sighed Brock. “It’s still worth starting off with the pub, we’ll need to lock it down until crime scene can get there. Who knows, we might find some prints.”

“I’d imagine you’ll find the prints of half the village all over the place to be honest,” Poole said.

“Maybe you could just stop being so helpful for a minute and let me have some hope of solving this case?”

“Sorry sir,” Poole said, grinning.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“I couldn’t tell you how many we had,” Bob Canter said as he scratched his bald head. “There’s been a load out the back here since I took over the place.”

“And how long is that?” Brock asked.

“I bought the place five years ago.”

“He’s still a newcomer,” John Pike added with a sly grin on his weathered face.

“What’s all this about Guy?” Bob asked Poole, the landlord’s expression one of worried confusion.

“I’m afraid Helen Susswich has been killed,” Poole answered, scrutinizing the reaction of the two men they had found in the garden of The Finch Inn.

The smile on the lips of John Pike, the head gardener of Stanton House, faded into a frown, whereas the landlord’s expression became wide-eyed shock.

“What do you mean, killed?” he asked breathlessly. “How could she have been killed?”

“I’m afraid it appears as though she has been murdered,” Brock said. “And although not confirmed, it looks as though the murder weapon may have been one of the sticks here from your Aunt Sally game.”

“Bloody hell,” Bob said, turning pale. He turned to his friend John, who was looking just as shocked now.

“We’ve been here all morning,” John said in his thick rural accent. “Ain’t no one been here to take ’em.”

“That’s right!” Bob nodded enthusiastically. “We’ve been out here for the last couple of hours. No one could have taken one this morning. They must have got it from somewhere else.”

“I think it’s more likely they took it before, don’t you?” Brock said with an eyebrow raised.

“Bloody hell,” Bob said again, his hand stroking back over his head once more.

“I’m off now, Bob... Oh.” A voice came from the pub. The four of them turned to see the barmaid Vanessa leaning from the back door, her wet blonde hair now cut short into a bob from when Poole had last seen her. She scanned their faces and made her way over to them. “Is everything OK?” Her eyes lingered on Poole for a moment. He felt her gaze and sensed it was his presence that had alerted her to something being wrong.

“This is Vanessa, sir,” Poole said to Brock, “she works here.”

“Vanessa Canter,” she added, turning to Brock.

“I’m Chief Inspector Brock, I’m afraid we’re here investigating a suspicious death.”

Vanessa’s large, mascara-laden eyes widened as her mouth formed an O.

“Oh my god, is it someone in the village?”

“Helen Susswich,” Bob answered.

Her hands flew to her mouth.

“Have any of you seen anyone hanging around the pub who shouldn’t have been?” Brock asked.

“No,” Bob said, “to be honest, we don’t get much passing trade not being on a main road. We mostly serve the village.”

“And I believe last night was quite a busy night?”

“Yeah,” Bob answered, then glanced at Poole. “You were here, Guy,” he added, but then failed to continue the sentence.

“There was quite a bit of tension last night,” Poole prompted.

Bob looked at John and then at Vanessa. “You can’t think anyone who was here had anything to do with it?” he said, incredulous. “It must have been some passing opportunist or something, maybe she was mugged?”

“You’ve already said that no one could have taken the stick in the last two hours,” Brock answered. “Which means they either took the thing very early this morning or before today completely. That suggests it was premeditated.”

“You don’t know the stick was from here, though?” John said, gesturing to the stick bucket.

“Not yet, no.”

“Wait,” Vanessa said, her eyes darting between them. “Are you saying someone took a stick from the Aunt Sally and... oh god!”

“We’ll need to take statements from you all,” Brock said, “but for now we’ll need to seal the garden off, no one in or out.”

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CHAPTER
TWELVE

“It could have just fallen down,” Poole said, looking at the flat stone that lay in the grass.

“You’re being helpful again, Poole,” Brock said.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Well,” Brock sighed, “you’re right. This entire wall looks as though it could topple at any minute.” His eyes ran down the length of the pub garden wall.

They had entered the field behind The Finch, while uniform took statements from Bob Canter, Ian Pike and Vanessa Canter. Brock had wanted to get the lay of the land, understand the steps that someone would have had to have taken to get to the rear garden of the pub. In doing so, they had found a stone in the grass, dislodged from the wall that ran along the rear of the pub’s garden.

“The thing is,” Brock continued, lifting the flat stone with one end of a pen he had pulled from his pocket, “the grass hasn’t grown around this, it has flattened it.”

“So it hasn’t been here long,” Poole finished. “I’ll get crime scene to check it for prints.”

Brock watched him head back towards the footpath that ran down the side of the pub and sighed. Although it had to be done, focusing on who

could have accessed the pub's garden was pointless. The wall that protected its border to the field was only three feet high and a short distance from a well-worn footpath which led down the side of the pub to the main road that ran through the village. The truth was, anyone could have taken a stick from here. They would need to focus on Helen Susswich. From what Poole had told him, she wasn't liked in the village. Someone had clearly decided that she had to be removed from it. Permanently.

He stared back over the wall and into the pub garden where the three villagers they'd spoken to were being interviewed. "What did you think when I asked why John Pike was here this morning?" he asked quietly.

Poole blinked for a moment before turning his own gaze across the wall to the garden. "He said he often comes over for a cup of tea in the morning."

"He did, yeah," Brock answered. "It just struck me that he said it a little too quickly, and a little too much as though it was a line he had ready to use."

"Whatever the reason," Poole said, "why would he lie? There's no crime in visiting a friend."

"No," sighed Brock, "It's probably nothing."

He turned and squinted across the field towards the woods where Helen Susswich's body had been found. The place seemed too peaceful, too beautiful to be marred by such an event. Yet he had worked in South Addervale long enough to know that the villages that peppered its lush green patchwork of fields were complex places of human stories tightly woven. Invariably they spilled over. Mostly this would result in someone causing a scene at a village fete, or drinking too much at the local pub's quiz night and voicing some previously internal opinions. Just occasionally, though, things would manifest themselves in a more tragic fashion.

More than that, his team were mixed up in all this, and who knew where that was going to lead them.

Poole returned and followed Brock's gaze towards the trees. "What are you thinking, sir?"

"I'm thinking that whoever did this is local, and probably one of the people who was in here last night. Whoever it was, they knew the route that Helen Susswich took on her dog walk, and at what time. They knew there were a set of sticks here at the pub that would probably have fingerprints from almost everyone we can pin with a motive."

"So we start with the Aunt Sally team," Poole said grimly.

"We do," Brock agreed, "but I think the members we talk to first should be the Susswich family. I want to know where everyone in this village was this morning, and who they have to confirm it. Come on," he said, turning away from the woods and striding off down the footpath. "We'll walk back to the manor the way the victim would have done if her walk hadn't been cut short."

Poole followed him, his thoughts trawling through the events of the following evening.

"Do you think it has to do with the Susswiches selling up?" he asked.

"It's as good a motive as any," Brock replied. "With David Susswich being the obvious candidate."

"Sanita and I saw him arguing with Helen last week."

Brock stopped and turned back to him. "What about?"

"I'm not sure for definite, but now I know about their plan to move away, I assume it was that."

"Well, let's find out," he said, turning back down the path. "But it seems a drastic move just for a house."

"Maybe Helen planned to make sure that David wouldn't get any inheritance. She's a lot younger than Patrick and once he's gone, presumably it will pass to her?"

"Unusually cynical for you, Poole," Brock said, in a tone that made Poole sure one eyebrow was raised despite the fact that he was following

him and unable to see his face. “Then we need to check up on his will and find out what the situation is. I’d imagine the estate and house are worth a fortune. Certainly motive enough for murder if you thought someone was taking it away from you.”

They slowed as the path they had been following came to a river.

“This is the river that runs through town,” Poole said.

“And the footpath carries on that way as well, by the look of it,” Brock said as he gestured to their left where the path forked off. He turned to the right and looked along the river, where he could make out the bridge they had crossed earlier when walking from the Manor House to the woods.

“So,” Brock said, hitching his trousers up with a grunt, “last night, you, Anderson and Sanders were all here?”

“Yes,” Poole answered cautiously, noting the use of Sanita’s surname, which meant this was work related.

“Which means all three of you have met the victim and most of the suspects.”

“Yes, sir.”

Brock turned to him, his face serious. “Then I think I should bring you all in on this case.”

“Right,” Poole said grimly.

Brock exhaled slowly. “I’m not happy about this either, but any of you could have seen something seemingly of no significance, that might later mean something.”

“We’re witnesses,” Poole said, the thought only now occurring to him.

“And suspects,” Brock added. “Come on.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

“Oh, it’s just awful!” exclaimed a short, rounded woman who peered at them from behind thick-lensed glasses, her high-pitched Welsh accent piercing through Poole’s brain, “and her being so young as well!” She pulled a handkerchief from her left sleeve and dabbed at her eyes.

“We’re very sorry for your loss,” Poole said for the third time in the space of as many minutes. “I’m sorry, but could you tell us your name?”

The woman placed a hand on her chest as her eyes widened. “Oh, my goodness! There’s me going on and I haven’t even said who I am! I’m Gwenith Addis, I’m the housekeeper here.”

“The housekeeper?” Poole asked, glancing at Brock.

“That’s right, I live here in the house, but I was away last night looking after my sister. She’s just had her hip replaced, and she’s been in awful pain. I said to Mr Susswich, ‘I’m sorry, but family comes first and I’ve got to look after her’. He soon backed down after that.” She gave a curt, smug nod of her head.

“And when did you arrive back this morning?” Poole asked.

“Just now, a taxi dropped me at the end of the driveway.” Her face froze suddenly. “Oh my goodness, am I a suspect?!”

“We just need to establish everyone’s whereabouts this morning,” Brock answered smoothly. He was used to the shock, whether real or fake, that

people showed when they realised they were now part of a murder enquiry. “We were on our way to see Mr Susswich, but perhaps we could ask you a few questions now we have you?” he continued.

“Of course, but I don’t see as how I can be much help?”

“You may not have been here at the time, but you live here, you know the family. Maybe you can think of someone who might have had reason to harm Helen Susswich?”

Something passed across the woman’s rounded face as her lips pursed. “I can’t think of anyone who’d kill her in cold blood, if that’s what you mean,” she said tersely.

“We know she wasn’t well liked in the village though,” Poole offered, hoping to draw more from her. “It might not have been intentional, maybe she had an argument with someone and they snapped?”

The woman blinked as she considered this. She turned back towards the house for a moment before returning her gaze to the two men and speaking in a low voice. “I’m not one to talk ill of the dead, but Mrs Susswich wasn’t a kind woman. She rubbed people up the wrong way and didn’t care that she did. I can’t see anyone killing her for it, though.”

Brock nodded and looked up at the house. “We’ll need to take a more detailed statement from you and speak to your sister, but if you might show us in to talk to Mr Susswich?”

The short woman gave another curt nod and led them up the steps to the main entrance.

Brock paused Poole at the top step with one hand on his arm. He was looking at his phone, concern furrowing his brow.

“I’ve got no reception out here, have you?”

Poole pulled his phone from his pocket and saw that he had one bar.

“Yep, but not great.”

“Fine.” Brock nodded. Reassured that Laura could call one of them if needed.

They found Constable David Davies in the hallway, leaning against a doorframe on the right. He straightened up on seeing them and gave a wide grin. "Hello sir, Morgan is still looking around upstairs, but it doesn't look like anything's out of place."

Brock grunted as his eyes moved up the enormous staircase towards the upper floors. He hadn't expected to find any signs of a disturbance here. If Patrick was lying about leaving the house with his wife and had killed her here, he would have had to have moved the body a long way into the woods along with the murder weapon. For a smaller man of his age, that seemed a tall order. If his son David had murdered his stepmother at the house, then Patrick's story of leaving with her in the morning didn't add up. They could, of course, be in it together, but that seemed unlikely. All avenues had to be explored, though.

They found Patrick Susswich in the library, sat alone in an armchair with a glass of whiskey in his hand despite it still being only mid-morning.

"Have you found them?!" he said sharply as they entered, leaning forward in his seat expectantly.

"Not yet, sir," Brock answered. He moved across the large room and leaned on the back of another armchair. "We'd like to talk through a few things with you."

"For goodness's sake! Shouldn't you be out there looking for whoever did this?!"

"Whoever did this could be many miles away by now," Brock replied. "Our best chance of finding your wife's killer is to understand who might have done this."

"Some crazed maniac, of course!" the man spluttered, his eyes wide with anger.

"Is there no-one you can think of locally that might have wished to harm your wife?" Poole offered.

Patrick's eye flickered to him in slight confusion, before his expression turned hard again.

“So what have people been saying then? You're obviously in with the gossip of the villagers these days, aren't you, Guy? Making their snide little comments out of jealousy?”

“I understand that Mrs Susswich wasn't overly well liked,” Poole replied without flinching.

“Ha!” Patrick shook his head. “And you think any of those village idiots knew her? She was better than all of them. They're just small little people with small insignificant lives who have nothing better to do than spread poison.”

Brock raised his eyebrows and exchanged a glance with Poole.

“Was there anyone in particular you feel was making malicious gossip against your wife?”

“Pick a bloody number,” Patrick muttered darkly as the door opened behind them.

“I told you not to talk to them without a lawyer,” David Susswich said as he came through the door.

“For goodness's sake, David,” Patrick snapped angrily. “Helen has been killed and I'll talk to who I bloody like.”

“Poole,” Brock said after a moment of awkward silence. “Maybe you could take David through to another room to take his statement?”

David eyeballed Brock for a moment before turning on his heels and marching back out of the door. Poole raised his eyebrows at Brock before following.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

The kitchen of Stanton House was more modern than Poole had been expecting. Its slick lines, industrial lights and shining cupboards seemed at odds with the worn, ancient stone of the place.

David pulled a bottle of whiskey from an unseen location behind the Long Island unit and poured himself a large glass.

“My father isn’t the man he used to be,” he said after talking a large gulp. “It’s not right that you are questioning him like this.”

“We’re just trying to establish some facts,” Poole answered flatly. “No one is accusing your father.”

David looked up at this, his eyes shining. “My father would never have hurt Helen.”

“They were happy then?”

David let out a bitter laugh. “Dad was, but then you’ll find older men who are seduced by younger, beautiful women tend to be.”

“You don’t think Helen was happy?”

David drained the rest of the whiskey before reaching for the bottle again. “Helen wasn’t the type of person who could ever be truly happy, if you ask me,” he said, pouring another glass. “She always wanted more.”

“More money?”

“More everything.” David grimaced. “She wanted money, yes, but she wanted power more. She wanted people to grovel at her feet.”

“Including you?” Poole asked, causing David to look at him sharply.

“I realise I’m the obvious choice, but I didn’t kill Helen. To be honest, you could probably take your pick from anyone in the village. She wasn’t exactly one to make friends.”

“You had the most to lose though,” Poole continued, “with your father and Helen planning to move away.”

“My father wouldn’t have left me high and dry.”

“Really? From what I heard, the plan was to sell the estate,” Poole said. “Maybe you’d intended to buy it from him?”

“Sadly, I’m not exactly in the financial position to do that,” David said with a tight grimace. “No, Dad would have seen sense, eventually.”

“Well, he doesn’t need to now,” Poole said with meaning. “With Mrs Susswich gone, it seems unlikely he will sell up now.”

David downed his drink. “Then at least one good thing has come from this bloody awful mess.”

“Where were you this morning when your mother-in-law was out for her walk?”

Poole noted the way the phrase “mother-in-law” almost made David physically flinch.

“I’ve already told your lot. I was here, at home, alone.”

“And there is no one you spoke to on the phone and nothing you did while here that could verify that?”

“No.” David pulled himself up straight. “I didn’t kill Helen, and my father didn’t either. If I were you, I’d look into some of the people in the village. Most of them hated her guts.”

“Anyone in particular you have in mind?”

David’s eyes narrowed. “I think once your lot start running your background checks there might be one that sticks out.”

Poole paused, waiting for him to expand further, but David simply took a deep breath and moved towards the door.

“Now if it’s quite all right with you, I am going to see to my father. He has just lost his wife, you know.”

Poole followed him out into the hallway, entering it as the large front door opened and Sergeant Anderson appeared, his square frame mirroring that of the opening. David Susswich barely glanced at him as he made his way across the room and back towards the library.

“Anderson?” Poole said, somewhat thrown by his appearance.

“Poole.” He nodded gruffly. “What’s the situation?”

“Situation?”

Anderson frowned at him. “With the murder enquiry? You are investigating a murder, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Poole answered, “we are.” He had emphasised the *we* maybe more aggressively than he had intended, but as usual, Anderson’s attitude had grated on him immediately.

Anderson folded his arms. “I’m assigned to this case now as well. I need you to get me up to speed on where we are.”

“At the start is where we are,” Poole said bluntly. “Come on.” He turned and followed David through to the library with Anderson in tow.

Brock was stood, arms folded, his eyes locked with David Susswich’s.

“We’ll need you both to come down to the station to make a full statement later,” he said. “I’ll give you a few hours and then send a car around.”

“How considerate of you,” David said, sarcasm dripping from his words. “I’ll drive us, thank you. Now if you could give my father and me some time alone?”

“Of course,” Brock said slowly, turning towards Poole and Anderson and marching between them without a word.

Outside, the three of them paused by Sanita, who was waiting at the bottom of the steps.

“What are you doing out here, Constable Sanders?” Brock asked gruffly.

“Sergeant Anderson told me to wait here,” she answered, slightly confused by the aggressive tone.

Brock spun to face Anderson. “Are those the instructions I passed on to you?” he barked.

“Sir?” Anderson answered, just as confused as Sanita.

“I called the station and said that you and Constable Sanders here were to be brought in on this investigation,” Brock continued. “Did I, at any point, suggest that Constable Sanders was to be brought into the investigation to be on guard duty?”

“No, sir,” Anderson answered.

“Right, well let’s leave the thinking to those that can actually do it, shall we?” He turned from the house and began marching away.

Anderson swore under his breath as they watched him go. “What’s his problem?”

“He doesn’t like the aristocracy,” Poole answered, trying to hide a grin. He nodded towards the car they had come in. “We’ll meet you back at the pub,” he added before jogging after Brock down the long driveway.

“Actually, there’s something we need to tell you about that,” Sanita called, stopping him in his tracks.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

They were gathered in the small carpark of The Finch where, thankfully, Brock's mood seemed to have brightened. He had said very little as he and Poole had made their way back along the path to the village, and Poole had known better than to push him. Now, though, his broad face was looking altogether more sanguine after hearing the news that Constable Sanita Sanders had brought him.

"He's got a record?" Brock asked, the rising inflection in his voice showing his interest.

"He has, sir," Sanita answered, "and not just a couple of parking tickets." She handed Brock a manilla folder.

"Handling stolen goods, couple of grievous bodily harm charges, knife possession," Brock said, his eyes scanning the folder in front of him. "Armed robbery? How come he only served six months?"

"Look at the dates, sir," Sanita said. "He was young. Apparently he was the getaway driver."

"These were all thirty years ago." He frowned as he looked up. "And there's nothing since?"

Sanita shook her head.

"Right," Brock said, handing the folder back and hitching up his trousers. "Looks like it's time for another chat with our friendly local

landlord.”

They found Bob Canter behind the bar of the pub, the front door open even if the establishment wasn't yet. Vanessa, the barmaid, was in the far corner wiping down tables and looked up with a smile as she saw them enter.

“Mr Canter?” Brock said as he approached the bar.

“Blimey,” Bob said, looking up from the sheets of paper he had been leaning over, his eyes scanning all four of them, “this must be half of Bexford police force you've brought over.”

“Not far off,” Brock nodded, “and it turns out you're a bit of an expert on the force, eh?”

One corner of Bob's mouth rose into a smile as he pulled himself upright from where he had been leaning on the bar. “So you've looked me up. I knew you would obviously, and come asking, but it was all a very long time ago. Another lifetime.”

“You didn't think to mention it when we spoke earlier, though,” Brock pressed.

Bob took a deep breath and looked up at the beamed ceiling of the pub. “Something told me this wasn't the kind of village that would take kindly to an ex-con coming in and taking over their historic pub. It's not something I broadcast, and as I say, it's behind me.”

“What's going on, Dad?” Vanessa said, approaching from the other side of the room where she had been watching the small group who were lined up at the bar as she worked. Her eyes, made almost cat-like by dark mascara, crawled with suspicion across the gathered group. Poole felt suddenly self-conscious about how many of them there were here, cramped under the low ceiling of The Finch like an invading force.

“We're just asking routine questions,” he said, stepping forward. “I'm sorry there's so many of us, but we're all just getting up to speed on what's

happened here this morning. Can you just tell us your movements since you woke up this morning?"

"I woke up, made myself a coffee, came down and started looking through the books. Vanessa was in the bathroom taking forever as usual." He smiled. "Then John came around and you found us in the garden."

"John Pike," Poole said, "why was he here so early?"

"He wanted to talk about the news up at the manor and what we were going to do about it. He's a good chap is John, but looking after that place is just about all he's got."

"What about Stuart?" Poole asked, before turning his head slightly towards Brock and adding "John Pike's son."

Bob gave a short laugh. "That little weasel?"

"Dad!" Vanessa said, her admonishing tone cutting him off.

"All right, all right," Bob said, holding his hands up to his daughter in defeat. "You'll have to excuse Vanessa," he said, addressing the group again, "Stuart follows her around like a little puppy and she feels sorry for him."

Vanessa tutted, rolled her eyes and folded her arms in what appeared to be a well-practiced motion.

Anderson stepped forward, his chin held high and a determined expression on his face. "Can you think of anyone who might want to harm Helen Susswich?" he said in a voice at least five decibels louder than anyone else in the conversation so far.

"Few liked her around here," Bob answered. "She liked to play lady of the manor a little too much. People will take that from Patrick, he's from old stock and people around here respect that. Helen though, she was playing a part. None of them would have killed her because of it though. A bit of spiteful gossip behind her back is more the style around here." He paused and looked across the faces, who were all turned to him. "David, on the other hand..."

“Oh, don’t be stupid, Dad!” Vanessa snapped. “David wouldn’t hurt anyone!” She turned to Poole, who was standing closest to her. “It’s probably just some random weirdo, right? Are you even sure it was one of the Aunt Sally sticks from here?”

“Do you know of another place with the game in the area?” Anderson asked.

Poole noticed he had his rather impressive chest pushed out before him. He realised, with a smirk he fought to hide, that Anderson was trying to appear impressive in front of Vanessa.

“There’s one in Finkley,” Bob answered, “but it’s a good six miles away so I’m pretty sure it’s one of ours. It’s not something people have lying around to hand, if you know what I mean. Look,” he said, leaning forward on the bar and addressing Brock again, “do you mind if we crack on? We’re opening in a few hours and I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be a busy day after this.” He grinned at them and held his hands wide. “People love a bit of scandal.”

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CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Poole glanced across at Anderson, who strode beside him as though he was leading an army into battle. He was arrogant, a bully and generally liked to antagonise people rather than make friends. Poole knew all this as fact, but he also knew he had to forget it. Soon they would be partners and they needed to find a way to work together, or they'd both be in trouble.

Brock had split them up, which Poole was grateful for. He had felt uncomfortable walking around in some sort of police gang. The four of them talking to Bob and Vanessa had made the atmosphere more tense than it had needed to be. He had hoped that they would pair him with Sanita, but knew that this was the way it was going to go. Brock was the more senior, Sanita the junior. They would be paired together. More than that, though, this was a dry run for what was to come. The new partnership of Poole and Anderson. He had to try.

“So, what else did Sanita find out? She said there was more?”

Anderson nodded as he walked, but didn't slow or turn to him. “There's a planning application in to put in a toilet block on the grounds. David Susswich was looking to start a glamping site there.”

“Glamping,” Poole said, frowning. “That's camping, but fancy, right?”

Anderson snorted in derision. "It's not camping if you've got power and sofas and things. Apparently they were going to use Mongolian yurts and kit them out so they're better stocked than my flat."

"In the grounds? I thought it was being sold up to some hotel chain?"

"It is. Sanders spoke to them and that offer had been on the table for a while. They thought it was dead, but got a call just a week ago from Patrick Susswisch saying he was willing to accept."

"I wonder what changed his mind?"

"He probably just came to his senses, the deal is in the millions," Anderson answered as he halted suddenly. "This is it." He gestured to a pebble-dashed house set back from the road.

Poole surveyed the building. It was a plain, greyish block which seemed to match the clouds above. The front garden was a neat and orderly square with a driveway running down the left-hand side. He couldn't help but think that this house perfectly reflected its owners.

"The home of the Barretts," he said as he opened the small gate and moved up the path that led to the front door. "Let's see what they've got to say."

"Let me take the lead on this," Anderson said as he pressed the doorbell.

Poole was about to tell him, in no uncertain terms, that they were working together and that Anderson wasn't in charge, when his new partner continued.

"I didn't talk to them the other night and you and Sanders did; it will be easier for me to question them."

Before Poole could answer that actually, he might have a point, the door opened and Mavis's pale face appeared.

"Oh, hello Guy. We were expecting you to be around."

"Morning Mavis, this is Detective Sergeant Anderson."

She gave him a weak smile and moved to one side.

“Come in and I’ll get the kettle on.”

They followed her into a magnolia hallway and then turned right into a small sitting room that was similarly beige.

“Morning Guy, glad it’s you that’s come,” Horace said, shaking his hand warmly.

Poole introduced Anderson before Mavis took tea orders and bustled off to the kitchen. Poole and Anderson were offered a small two-seater sofa, which faced another. Poole’s thin frame squashed at one end with Anderson’s broad shoulders, taking most of the available room.

“I take it from your welcome that you’ve heard the news about Helen?” Poole said.

“Oh yes, the entire village is talking about it. Such a shock!”

Poole was about to ask how word had spread so quickly when Anderson cleared his throat loudly.

“Where were you this morning at around seven a.m.?” he said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. There was a clang from the kitchen, which made Horace look up before turning back to Anderson to reply.

“We were here all morning. Is it true they think poor Helen might have been murdered?”

“We are treating the death as suspicious, yes,” Anderson replied.

Poole glanced at him, but decided not to ask how likely it was that Helen Susswich hit herself over the head with an Aunt Sally stick.

“Just horrible,” Horace said, shaking his head.

Mavis appeared from the kitchen with a tray containing a teapot and cups and saucers that were white with small pictures of cats on. Poole was happy to see there was a tray of biscuits as well and took two of the chocolate-covered ones when she offered the plate towards him.

“Can you think of anyone who would wish to harm Helen Susswich?” Anderson said after he had refused the biscuit plate.

“Oh!” Mavis said, in a little chirp of fright. “Surely you don’t think someone from the village could have done it, do you?”

“We’re just covering all angles,” Anderson replied in a level voice, “and most crimes of this nature are committed by people close to the victim.”

Poole tried to give Mavis an apologetic smile for Anderson’s blunt manner, but he had just taken a large bite of biscuit, so the effect was more of a grimace.

“Someone close to her?” Horace said. “So you think it was David?”

Anderson placed his hands together as he leaned even further forward. “And why would you think David Susswich would want to harm his stepmother?”

“Oh!” Horace said, looking troubled. “I’m sure David would have nothing to do with it, I was just thinking of all this business about future plans for the estate.”

“David Susswich had wanted to turn it into a glamping site,” Poole said, earning a sharp look from Anderson.

“Yes,” Mavis said, smiling and sitting up straighter, “Horace and I are actually going to be the site managers!”

“Going to be?” Anderson repeated. “So you think the plans will be back on now that Helen Susswich is out of the way? Some might say that would give the two of you an excellent motive for wanting her gone.”

Poole coughed on the last fragment of biscuits, Mavis recoiled in horror and Horace reached out and took her teacup and saucer from her before she dropped it.

“Now listen here,” Horace said in a voice too shaky to deliver the firm tone that was intended, “I won’t have you accusing my wife and me of such things in my own house.”

“If you’d prefer,” Anderson said, “I’d be happy to escort you to the station at Bexford and accuse you of them there?”

Horace’s mouth opened to mirror the wide circles of his eyes.

“Tell us about the glamping business,” Poole said, trying to move on before the pale Mavis started crying.

Horace swallowed. “David told us the Manor House is in a bit of a state and needs a proper income to make sure they can restore properly. They’ve got quite a bit of land and he thought it would be good for the village if it could be put to use and bring a bit of trade into the pub. Maybe the village shop could reopen?”

“It closed down about five years ago,” Mavis said, recovering enough to pick up her tea again now they were back on more familiar ground. “There’s just not enough people here to keep it going, but if it could get the trade from the campsite—”

“The glamping site,” Horace corrected with a smile. Poole realised they had both become animated in talking about this. He might have thought Anderson ridiculous for suggesting this meek couple could have bludgeoned a woman to death, but they clearly did care about these plans of David Susswich’s.

“And how did you get to be in line for the management jobs?” Poole asked.

“Well,” Mavis said, giving her husband a knowing look, “Horace had been getting a bit stir crazy since he’d left the accountancy firm, hadn’t you, love?”

Horace gave a sheepish grin. “It’s been a big change, retirement I mean —”

“I’d spoken to David about it and he thought we’d be perfect to look after the place. It would only really be through the summer, we would shut it up over the winter months.”

“And presumably this was a paid position?” Anderson interjected. “So you’ve lost out financially from it all falling through?”

“Actually, David had offered us two percent of any profits as payment,” Horace said a little stiffly. “No one was quite sure how successful the whole

thing would be.”

“Oh, come on,” Anderson said, leaning back and smiling like a shark sensing blood. “A picturesque village like this? The gardens of a Manor House? The place would have been sold out for at least half the year. How much was a week in one of these things going to cost?”

“Eight hundred pounds,” Mavis said, glancing at Horace like a rabbit who has just realised there’s a fox in the room.

Anderson gave a low whistle. “Did you hear that, Poole? Eight hundred pounds for a week in a tent! Even if it is a posh one, that’s quite something.” He turned back to the couple sat opposite them. “You’re an accountant, Horace. I’m sure you know that this could have been quite the little earner for you. You must have been pretty annoyed when you realised Helen Susswich was going to take this chance away from you?”

“It was a shock, I won’t pretend it wasn’t,” Horace said, “but to be honest, we didn’t actually believe Patrick would go through with it and leave Stanton Manor.”

“Why not?” Poole asked.

“Well,” Mavis said, as if the answer was obvious, “the Susswiches have been here for centuries! He wouldn’t give all that up for someone like Helen.”

There was a bitterness in her tone that took Poole by surprise, but not Anderson, who leapt on it like a bear on salmon. “And what was Mrs Susswich like?” he said quickly. “Clearly you didn’t like her very much.”

The couple looked at each other for a moment before Horace spoke. “She was a difficult woman, and didn’t always read people in the way she should have done. People here respect tradition and the old ways, but Helen liked to think of the people in the village as though they were all servants for the Manor House. I think you’ll find that most people found her an abrasive character.”

“So,” Anderson said, letting back his head, so he was looking down his nose at them, “you were set to lose out on a lucrative deal because of Helen Susswich’s actions, and you clearly already didn’t like her. On top of all that, your only alibi that you were here alone all morning is each other?”

Mavis looked at Horace wide-eyed, and he took her hand and squeezed it in response.

“I think we’re probably done here for now,” Poole said, rising from his seat. “Thank you for the tea and biscuits.”

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CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Brock glanced down at the young constable to his left. She didn't seem at all nervous at joining her superior to interview a suspect in a murder case. Even if he was soon to be chief inspector. Of course, she had no real reason to be. They socialised enough outside of work now to be considered friends, but still.

Chief inspector. The words still tumbled around in his mind like tea bags in a teapot whenever he thought of them. Would they ever settle? Would they ever feel natural and familiar to him? He sighed, making Sanita look up at him.

"Everything OK, sir?"

"What's this chap like?" Brock asked, ignoring her question.

"Henry Chambers? I didn't speak to him much the other night, but he seemed a bit slimy."

"Slimy?"

"Yeah, you know. One of those people who are all flash and smiles like they're your best friend, but you can't help the feeling that they've forgotten you as soon as they look away."

Brock grunted a small laugh. "Yeah, I think I know the type."

"I'm not sure we'll even find him at home," Sanita continued. "He was off somewhere for a few days. Caused a bit of a stir in the pub, actually."

“Oh?”

“Yeah, Patrick Susswich seemed annoyed about it for some reason. Maybe he just didn’t want to be a man down on the Aunt Sally team.”

“Maybe,” Brock answered thoughtfully.

“Hold on!” Sanita shouted suddenly before running into the road and waving her hands before a sleek black car that was making its way down the road towards them. Brock watched open-mouthed as the car slowed to a stop rather than run over an officer of the law.

“I think this is our chap, sir!” Sanita said, eyes wide, a smile on her lips.

“Let’s hope so now that you’ve risked your life for it,” Brock muttered as he made his way over to the car to join Sanita as the driver’s window wound down.

“Oh, Sanita, wasn’t it?” Henry Chambers said, one hand running through his blond hair as he smiled at her.

“Constable Sanders today, Mr Chambers,” Sanita answered, “and this is Detective Inspector Brock. Can I ask where you’re going?”

Henry continued to smile, but it had a slightly frozen quality as his eyes flicked to Brock.

“I’m going away for a few days on business.”

“Then I suggest you pull over and have a brief word with us now before you go,” Brock said.

There was a moment’s hesitation before Henry nodded in agreement. “Of course.”

Brock and Sanita moved to the pavement again as they waited for him to pull over.

“I see what you mean,” Brock said, “I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him, and my back’s been playing up recently.”

“Now,” Henry said, spreading his hands wide as he approached them, “how can I help you officers?”

“Can I ask where you’ve been this morning?” Brock asked.

“At home.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.” He frowned as he looked between them. “I’m sorry, but what is all this about?”

“I’m afraid a woman has been killed in the village.”

“Killed? Bloody hell. Who was it?”

“Helen Susswich,” Sanita answered.

“Helen? My god.” He turned away from them, his eyes wandering the floor as though searching for some kind of answers until he looked up sharply. “Patrick hasn’t pointed the finger at me, has he? Is that why you’re here?”

“And why would he do that?” Brock asked, one large eyebrow rising.

Henry’s face flashed with realisation. “No reason, sorry, shock of it all,” he answered casually, the smile returning. “How is Patrick? A mess I’d imagine, she was everything to him.”

Brock eyed him for a moment, but Henry’s smile was firmly back on its game now.

“And what was your relationship with Helen Susswich?”

“With Helen? Oh, we got on, but we weren’t close or anything. I’m not sure Helen was close to anyone to be honest.”

“Patrick Susswich seemed quite annoyed with you the other night?” Sanita said.

“Oh, just a fuss about nothing. Patrick had just had a bit to drink.” Henry laughed.

“What was the disagreement about, though?” Sanita pressed. “It sounded like it might have been to do with your leaving for a few days?”

“Listen,” Chambers said, leaning forward and lowering his voice somewhat conspiratorially. “You’ve met Patrick, the old duffer’s stuck in the last century. He thinks because he’s the self-proclaimed lord of the manor that he can just make a business deal happen by sheer will.”

“You’re in business with him then?” Brock asked.

“Not as such,” Henry answered, tilting his head from side to side as well as his hands. “David’s pushing Patrick to make the estate more sustainable. A place like that needs a lot of upkeep. I’d been helping him explore options.”

“Like?”

“Oh all sorts of things, nothing concrete. That’s actually why I’m off for a few days, I’m meeting with some potential investors.”

“So why would Mr Susswich have a problem with that?” Brock asked. “Surely he’d welcome it?”

“Like I said, he’s old-school. Thinks it all should have been wrapped up by now. I keep telling him these things take time.”

“And how does this tie in with Patrick and Helen’s plan to sell the estate to a hotel and spa company?” Sanita said.

Henry Chamber’s mouth dropped open, his veneer of confidence cracking like porcelain.

“What are you talking about?” he said, his voice coming out dry and unclear.

“Patrick and Helen Susswich planned to accept an offer from a hotel and spa company,” Sanita repeated. “They were selling up and moving on.”

“But, he can’t just leave!” Henry said, both hands running through his hair.

“Are you saying you knew nothing of this?” Brock asked.

“Of course I didn’t!” he said angrily, half turning and kicking at the floor. “This is bloody Helen’s doing. Filling his head with rubbish about me.” He paused and turned to them. “Sorry, I didn’t mean... poor Helen.”

“I take it she wasn’t your biggest fan then, Mr Chambers?” Brock said, hitching his trousers up and folding his arms.

Chambers’ salesperson smile was back on his lips. “Oh, no. Helen and I got on fine! Sorry, this is all just a bit of a shock. Don’t know what I’m

saying!”

“I’m going to ask you where you were this morning one more time, Mr Chambers,” Brock said in a low, hard tone that made Sanita want to answer even though it wasn’t directed at her. “Where were you this morning?”

Henry blinked for a moment before answering. “I’ve told you, Inspector, I was at home alone.”

“And your house sits at the end of the Main Street, set back into the field, I believe?”

“That’s right...” He frowned. “Wait, where did this happen?”

“It was in Game Wood,” Sanita answered.

“I see,” Henry said, nodding, “and you think I’ve walked along the field at the back to the woods and attacked her or something? Well, you’re barking up the wrong tree.” His smile was no longer his well-practised one of effortless charm. It was like the toothy grin of a shark. “I’ll tell you who I did see going that way this morning, though: Stuart Pike.” His grin broadened as he watched interest register on their faces. “He was out very early, around seven and walking up the edge of the field from his dad’s place further down from me, and he was heading towards the wood.”

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CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

“You did well there,” Brock said as they watched Henry Chambers’ car perform a three-point turn and head back the way he had come. Brock had told him not to leave the village for a while, until the investigation had made more headway. An order that had gone over slightly better than expected.

“Thank you, sir,” Sanita answered, just stopping herself from asking why he seemed surprised.

“He’s a slippery one all right,” Brock said, scratching the stubble on his thick chin. “But he seemed genuinely shocked to hear of Mrs Susswich’s murder.”

Sanita shrugged. “Someone like that could be an excellent actor. He didn’t seem to worry about his trip being cancelled.”

“Hmm.” Brock nodded. “I wonder if that’s because he realised he might have better hunting here again.”

“Sir?” Sanita asked quizzically, turning to him.

“Never mind,” he said, setting off in the direction the car had gone. “Let’s go and speak to this neighbour of his he saw heading towards the woods this morning.”

Sanita jogged to catch up as the inspector’s powerful strides drove him along the pavement.

“Stuart Pike,” she said as she came alongside him. “He works up at the big house with his dad.”

“I met his father at the pub this morning.” Brock nodded before coming to a stop. “There’s two likely lads,” he said, nodding to where Anderson and Poole had emerged from a house further along the road. “Call someone and find out what John Pike said in his statement this morning before we speak to his Stuart. It’ll be interesting to see if he mentions his son’s morning excursion. I’m going to find out what the Barretts had to say for themselves.”

He left Sanita pulling her phone from her pocket and made his way across to the others. They had spotted him and were waiting on the pavement, Anderson with chin raised to the sky and hands on hips, Poole with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“I just think you are letting your own opinions get in the way of the facts,” Anderson said as Brock approached. He couldn’t escape the feeling that the sergeant’s voice had raised just enough to ensure he heard it.

“I hope there’s not a problem here?” Brock said as he reached them.

“No problem, sir,” Poole answered lightly. “Anderson here just thinks he’s caught Stanton-on-Mead’s answer to Bonnie and Clyde.”

“Enough!” Brock said, raising one large hand in front of him before Anderson could respond. “Anderson, wait with Sanders and find out what she gets on John Pike’s statement.”

Anderson clearly had no clue what this referred to, but rather than protest, he shot Poole a barbed look and headed across the road.

“I know, I know,” Poole said, shaking his head in frustration.

Brock nodded, saying nothing for a moment. They had talked about this often enough now that he didn’t need to. Poole and Anderson were going to need to make it work.

“I’ll sort it, sir,” Poole said, “don’t worry.”

Brock inhaled the increasingly warm late morning air. “I think you and Anderson should lead this investigation.”

Poole’s head jerked towards him. “Lead it?”

“That’s what I said,” Brock answered softly. “You’ll be doing it soon enough. You might as well get your first taste of it now, but I want everything fed back to me. You’ll be in charge of the case, but I want everything in front of my eyes at the end of each day.”

“You’ll have it,” Poole answered firmly, “and I’ll sort the situation with Anderson.”

“I hope you do,” Brock said with meaning. “Come on, let’s see what Sanders has got for us.”

They crossed back over the road as Sanita was sliding her phone back into her pocket.

“John Pike said he was home this morning before he walked over to the pub,” she said, smiling.

“And what about his son?” Brock asked, though he could tell from her expression what the answer was going to be.

“He was with him,” Sanita answered, “he says he left him at the house at around eight thirty.” She turned to Poole and Anderson, who were looking slightly lost. “Henry Chambers told us he saw Stuart Pike walking towards the woods an hour earlier than that, around seven thirty.”

“So someone’s lying,” Brock said, hitching up his trousers and turning to Anderson and Poole, “and I think it’s time you two found out. Fill Anderson in, Poole. Constable Sanders and I are going to get some well-deserved lunch.” He turned and headed back towards The Finch. Sanita gave a quick, confused glance at Poole, and then followed.

“Fill me in on what?” Anderson asked.

Poole turned to him and folded his arms. “He’s given us the case,” he said, “we’re leading it and reporting back to him at the end of each day.”

Anderson's nostrils flared for a moment as he sucked in air through them before exhaling slowly.

"OK," he said, turning to Poole, "then I suggest you stop butting in when I'm interviewing suspects."

Poole opened his mouth to protest, then stopped himself.

"I don't agree with how hard you were being on the Barretts," he said slowly, "but I appreciate you have your methods and I have mine. We need to work together to make this work."

He waited for Anderson's mocking, sarcastic tone to bite back, and was surprised when it was missing for his reply.

"You're right," Anderson said. "We might not have wanted our opportunity to come like this, but it has. We need to make it work."

"Right." Poole nodded.

They stood in an awkward silence for a moment until Poole's phone rang; it was Sanita.

"I thought you were off to get lunch?" he said on answering.

"We are, but I thought I'd better update you properly before I tuck into a Sal's sandwich."

Poole groaned at the thought of missing out on one of Sal's sandwiches but tried to remain professional. "Go on then, what have you got?"

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CHAPTER
NINETEEN

“I’m not sure I should be talking to you without my dad,” Stuart Pike said. Despite these words, he didn’t appear to be anxious at Anderson and Poole’s arrival, more like amused.

“And why’s that?” Poole asked. “You’re a grown man, I’m sure you can speak for yourself.”

“Oh, I can,” Stuart answered with a wide smile. “He just might not want me talking for him.”

“What do you mean by that?” Anderson asked sharply.

Stuart laughed. “Nothing at all. I guess you’re here to talk to me about Helen getting bumped off?”

“You don’t seem overly upset,” Poole said.

“Why should I be?” Stuart asked, leaning against the front door frame of the small cottage he lived in with his father. It was a ramshackle place that sat alone towards the end of the village in a small square of immaculately tended garden.

“She was your employer, wasn’t she?” Anderson said. “I’d have thought you’d be just a little upset at her being murdered.”

The smile fell from Stuart’s face as he stood upright again. “Not many people around here liked Helen,” he said flatly. “She liked to put everyone in their place which, funnily enough, was always beneath her.”

“Where were you this morning?” Poole asked.

“I was here, with my dad,” Stuart answered quickly.

“All morning? Just the two of you?”

“That’s right.”

“Then how come we have a witness who saw you walking through the field at the back of the village towards the woods early this morning?”

Stuart blinked at Anderson with the air of someone who has realised their firm grip on the situation had just become significantly looser.

“Who was it?” he asked.

“Never mind that,” Anderson continued, “just tell us where you were going.”

Stuart remained silent, his expression suggesting he was thinking hard.

“If one person saw you,” Poole said, “then it’s likely others did too. Just tell us where you were going and what you were doing.”

“No one saw me,” Stuart said angrily, “but I saw them! Half the village was out this morning. Why aren’t you talking to all of them?”

“Who did you see?” Anderson asked.

“The Barretts for one.”

Anderson glanced at Poole meaningfully. “You saw the Barretts out this morning? Where?”

Stuart gave a chuckle. “Those two aren’t what you think they are, you know. All that innocent ‘butter wouldn’t melt in their mouth’ act, you don’t know the half of it.”

“Then why don’t you tell us?” Anderson said.

“Not my place to say,” Stuart said, putting his hands up in front of him. “You’ll have to ask them what they get up to when they think no one’s looking.”

“Who else did you see?” Poole asked.

Stuart opened his mouth and then closed it again. “Just them,” he answered.

“A minute ago you said half the village was out there this morning?”
Poole said doubtfully.

“Just a figure of speech,” Stuart answered in a tone that suggested there was no way he was going to elaborate further.

“You still haven’t explained where you were going this morning.”

“I was just out for a walk, nothing wrong with that.”

“And you went to the woods?”

“No, I didn’t go near it!”

“So where did you go?”

Stuart folded his arms. “I just did a loop of the field, get some of that nice fresh morning air in my lungs.”

Poole looked at Anderson, who had been quiet for some time. His blue eyes narrowed, his lips pursed.

“So you say you went for this walk alone?” Anderson said.

“That’s right.”

“And what time was this?”

“I don’t know, about half seven?”

There was a pause as Anderson continued to stare at the young man. Poole could feel the intensity of it even though it wasn’t directed at him. For a moment, he recognised that Anderson had learned to use his intimidating size in the same way Brock had. He was just less subtle and refined about it.

“Then why,” Anderson continued, his voice firm, “did your father say he was home alone with you all morning until much later, when he went along to The Finch?”

Stuart’s eyes widened and his posture stiffened. “Oh, yeah, that’s right. I was at home with Dad.”

“But we know you were out enjoying the fresh morning air, as you put it.”

“Yeah, well,” Stuart said, his weight shifting from foot to foot, “I was here with Dad before, and I was only out for a bit and then I was back here with him until he went to The Finch.”

“So both you and your father have a period this morning where no one can vouch for your activities?” Anderson continued.

“Oh, come on,” Stuart said. “Why would we want to do away with Helen?”

“Maybe because she had convinced her husband to sell Stanton Manor to a hotel and spa company?” Poole said.

“Dad wasn’t worried about that. The old man would have seen us all right. Dad says he would have made sure they kept us on.”

“The old man being Patrick Susswich?”

“Yeah, he’s not a bad old boy really,” Stuart said, his eyes looking distant for a moment, “He’s going to be a right mess about Helen dying.”

There was another pause as the two officers waited for more. When it wasn’t forthcoming, Poole continued.

“Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to harm Helen Susswich?”

Stuart looked up as he snapped back into the moment.

“There weren’t many that liked her, if that’s what you mean?” he said after a momentary pause. “She was the kind who enjoyed making everyone feel small, if you know what I mean? No one was good enough for her around here.”

“But can you think of anyone in particular who might have had cause to harm her?”

“No,” Stuart said firmly, “no I can’t.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

“So,” Anderson said once they were back outside and making their way along the village’s Main Street, “I think the first thing we need to do is find out why John Pike lied about being with his son, and why the Barretts lied about being at home all morning.”

“I think it’s obvious why John Pike lied,” Poole answered.

“To cover for his son.” Anderson nodded.

“The Barretts are a bit more of a mystery,” Poole continued, “they don’t seem the type to lie.”

Anderson snorted. “How on earth have you made detective?” He laughed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Poole said, stopping and turning to Anderson.

“That you trust people too easily. This sweet older couple act of theirs has got you thinking they can’t have murdered Helen Susswich, even when we know they’ve lied to us.”

“I’m not writing them off as suspects,” Poole countered, “they just seem unlikely candidates for stalking someone down in the woods and clubbing them to death.”

Anderson frowned. “And what exactly does a killer look like?”

Poole opened his mouth to respond and then closed it again. He had been about to give another sharp response, but something in Anderson's words rang a familiar note with him. It was something Brock had said on more than one occasion. A killer never has one face, one personality, one 'type'. This was because every person driven to murder had different motives, and a unique set of circumstances which had led them to the ultimate extreme act. Poole took a deep breath. Maybe there was more to Anderson than just the brash and aggressive exterior he wore. Maybe behind it all, there was just a man trying to be a good detective. In any case, Poole needed to make this work.

"You're right," Poole said, causing a brief look of surprise to pass across Anderson's strong features. "Killers don't have a 'type', and although the Barretts might seem unlikely, they've lied to us. Also, there's two of them."

"Why would that make a difference?"

Poole shrugged. "Two people can be bolder than one. One person might have all sorts of crazy thoughts, but never act on them. Two people, though, if they were close, might talk about it. After a while, it might not seem so crazy."

The corners of Anderson's mouth twitched up slightly. "There isn't anything you and Sanders need to confess about, is there, Poole?"

Poole gave a small laugh, half in humour, half in shock at the fact Anderson had made a joke. "Why don't we grab lunch at the pub?"

"We can't stop and have lunch at a place that's in the middle of a murder investigation," Anderson said, frowning. "We could compromise the case."

"Compromise it how?" Poole laughed. "We already know everyone involved in the case, we can't change that now. Going to the pub now will achieve three important things," he said.

"OK," Anderson said, "I'll bite. What are they?"

Poole held up his hand and began counting off fingers. “One, in a small village like this, where do you think people will go when something big happens? I’ve got a feeling that Sunday lunchtime at The Finch might be the busiest they’ve had in a while.”

Anderson considered this and then gave a small nod. “OK, go on.”

“Two, John Pike lied about his son being home all morning, which means he doesn’t have an alibi, either. We know he was at the pub early this morning because we found him there when we went to speak to the landlord, and the pub’s near to the woods. I think we should ask Bob Canter exactly what time his friend turned up.”

“OK, makes sense,” Anderson conceded, “but I might as well hear number three.”

“Number three is the most important of all. Something that could make an enormous difference to breaking this case.”

Anderson stiffened, his face alert. “What is it?”

Poole grinned at him and patted his belly. “I think a lot better on a full stomach.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Sanita sat in Poole's office chair, feeling as though she was somehow invading his space despite his absence. She finished the last mouthful of her BLT sandwich, which was as brilliant as the sandwiches from Sal's had always been, and began to relay the information from the file in front of her.

"Uniform has made the doorstep rounds. In general, no one in the village saw anything," she said, causing Brock to grunt from behind his desk as he too polished off the last of his sandwich. His had been almost twice the size of hers, a fact which he had asked her not to relay to his wife Laura. Sanita had promised to obey her commanding officer while at work, but also told him in no uncertain terms that she would tell her friends whatever she wanted outside of it. This had caused Brock to retract into a silent scowl, which she was relieved to see seemed to have softened now he had eaten.

"You said in general," he said, scrunching up the wax paper his sandwich had come in and tossing it in the bin, "so someone saw something?"

"Not this morning, but the postman says he saw Helen Susswich and Vanessa Canter arguing last weekend on his rounds around seven in the morning."

“Where was this?”

“That’s the interesting part,” Sanita said with a smile, “he says Helen Susswich was in the field behind the pub and Vanessa was in the pub garden.”

“And that’s interesting why?” Brock asked.

Sanita was sure he knew the answer to this, but responded to the test.

“Because it shows that Vanessa knew Helen’s dog walking route, which means she would have known where to find her this morning if she wanted. It also implies something strange is going on with the timing of Helen’s walk, because her husband said she set out at seven every morning. If the postman’s right, on the day of this row, she was already at the pub by then.”

“Well done, Constable,” Brock said, a satisfied smile on his face. “Also, let’s not forget that her father has a record. Not that it means much, of course.”

Sanita couldn’t help but smile at that. She knew just how much Brock had supported Poole when his father’s criminal past had come back to put them all in harm’s way. He wasn’t the type to put the faults of the parents immediately onto their children.

“At the very least, we should find out what they were arguing about,” she continued.

“From what I’ve heard, many people seemed to have found things to argue with Helen Susswich about.” Brock answered thoughtfully, “We’re in an unusual position in this murder enquiry, Sanders. You and Poole actually met the victim when she was alive. What was your honest opinion of her?”

Sanita thought for a moment, her forehead creasing as she brought an image of the tall, willowy blonde to mind.

“I generally don’t like to judge someone when I don’t really know them,” Sanita began, “but I’d say she was someone who was ambitious and tough. Someone who had got where she wanted to be and wasn’t going to let anyone take it away from her.”

“Interesting choice of words,” Brock said after a moment’s pause, “did you get the impression someone was trying to ‘take it away from her,’ as you put it?”

“I’m not saying anyone was exactly,” Sanita answered, shaking her head. “It’s more that I think Helen would have thought someone was, regardless. I remember her staring at Guy and me like we were some threat as soon as she saw us. I thought it was something about us, but then I realised she gave that look to the whole pub. As though they were all beneath her and were going to try to steal her purse or something at any moment.”

“So she seemed a suspicious, defensive woman,” Brock mused, leaning back in his chair. “What do you make of the plans her and her husband had to sell up?”

Sanita smiled. “Oh, I’m sure that would have been her idea. Patrick Susswich struck me as someone who loves his village and the history his family had there. Helen, on the other hand—” She paused in thought.

“What about her?” Brock prompted.

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s just that everyone in the village seemed to think she enjoyed playing lady of the manor and talking down to everyone.”

“Well, you more or less said that yourself.”

“Yes,” Sanita continued, “but I didn’t get the sense she really belonged there. I think she would have been far happier getting Patrick, and all that went with him, away from the village and all its history and gossiping locals.”

Brock smiled. “For someone who doesn’t like to judge someone they’ve just met, you’re pretty bloody good at reading them.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

As Poole had suspected, The Finch was a hive of activity. Although he had expected locals to decide that this would be the most interesting day to have a Sunday lunch at The Finch in quite some time, he hadn't expected to find two small groups of people stood outside trying to peer in the windows.

"What are you doing?" Anderson barked at them before Poole could ask with slightly more tact.

The heads of the people spun to look at them, and Poole immediately recognised at least two faces.

"Sergeant," a young, scrawny man said, already holding forward a Dictaphone as he advanced. "Can you tell us what happened here this morning?"

Poole left Anderson to give the usual brush-off to the *Bexford Gazette* and moved to the front door of the pub. He pulled the handle and found it locked. Confused, he too moved across to one of the small, dirty windowpanes and tried to peer through into the dark pub. There were several vaguely human shapes moving ghostlike in the gloom, but he could make out no specifics until he saw the back of a woman with a blonde, bobbed haircut. A shiver ran through him as he had the eerie feeling he was looking at the ghost of Helen Susswich when a large, round face appeared

directly on the other side of the glass, making him jump back in fright. Bob Canter grinned and nodded his head towards the door.

Anderson left the reporters looking slightly downcast and joined Poole as the pub door unlocked and Bob gestured them inside.

“Not your normal kind of lock-in,” Bob cackled, rubbing his hands together, “but I’m not having that lot in here bothering everybody with questions, that’s what you lot are for, eh?” He slapped Anderson on the shoulder and turned away smiling, apparently oblivious to the scowl it produced on the sergeant’s stern face.

“He seems in good spirits,” Poole commented as they looked around the pub, receiving polite smiles and hushed whispers from the many gathered locals.

“I’m not surprised,” Anderson said, “it looks like murder is good for business.”

They took one of the few remaining tables in the pub’s corner and looked at the two plastic menus that lay there.

“Not a lot of choice,” Anderson said flatly.

Poole had to agree. Rabbit pie, roast pheasant and two sandwich choices both served with chips wasn’t exactly going to win any awards. But he was so hungry at this point he didn’t care.

“I’ll go and order. What do you want?”

Anderson grudgingly chose the ham and cheese sandwich, and Poole made his way to the bar. Vanessa Canter was serving a local at the far end, and Poole realised it was her he had seen through the window earlier. It was her father, Bob, who came to serve him.

“So, what can I get you?”

Poole placed his order, deciding to go for the same as Anderson, and watched as the landlord poured them two Cokes.

“Bob,” he said, deciding to go with familiarity over officialdom, “what time did John Pike get here this morning?”

Bob's eyes flicked up to him from the drinks for a moment.

"John? He was here about quarter to nine."

"And he came straight from his house?"

Bob straightened up and placed the two glasses on the bar between them.

"You should probably ask him that, but yeah, he did."

"Does he always come over so early on a weekend?"

Bob smiled, but it was forced. "Can we lay off the interrogation for a bit? I'm kind of busy here." He gestured to the pub with one pudgy hand.

"Of course," Poole smiled, "sorry, I'm not very good at switching off." He smiled again and turned back towards their table. As he did so, he saw Stuart Pike enter through the pub's main door and pause as he saw Poole. The young man appeared frozen for a moment before carrying on towards the bar.

"The landlord says that John Pike got here at quarter to nine," Poole said as he placed the drinks down and sat opposite Anderson.

"So where was John Pike before that?" Anderson said.

"His son's just come in," Poole said, nodding towards the bar where Stuart was now talking to Vanessa.

"I saw," Anderson said, "and I think they might be talking about us."

Poole turned to see Stuart and Vanessa bent low over the bar, talking in what seemed to be heated whispers before Vanessa's enormous eyes, dark with mascara, turned to them for a moment.

"Is it just me," Poole said, turning back to his drink, "or does she look a little afraid of something he's telling her?"

"It's not just you," Anderson said grimly.

For a few moments they both surreptitiously watched the exchange, until their sandwiches appeared from a hatch to one side of the bar and Bob brought them over.

“Here you go, gents,” he said, laying the plates down as though presenting the finest cuisine.

“Everything all right over there?” Poole nodded back towards the bar. Bob turned and looked as both Stuart and Vanessa looked towards them again, before the young man turned and headed for the door.

“Ah,” said Bob, smiling, “I think you’ll find young Stuart has a bit of a crush on my girl.”

“They’re dating?” Anderson asked, causing Poole to smile at the rather old-fashioned term.

Bob laughed out loud. “No! I don’t think he’s got much of a chance there.” He moved back towards the bar, still chuckling.

“I think Stuart Pike was talking about us rather than trying to make moves on Vanessa anyway,” Poole said once the barman was out of earshot.

“It looked like it.” Anderson nodded in agreement. “Maybe he was warning her about something? Making sure she had her story straight?”

Poole frowned. “It’s straight enough as it is. She was at home with her dad, Brock and I saw her when we arrived at the pub.”

“Maybe, but we know John. Pike lied about being with his son this morning. Maybe Bob Canter lied about being with his daughter?”

Poole’s eyebrows rose as he considered this. “And John Pike and Bob Canter were together here in the pub beer garden when we arrived. Maybe they’d been together all that morning? You did say that this kind of crime could have been done by two people.”

“Why would the two of them join forces, though?” Anderson said as his eyes followed the landlord, who was making the rounds of tables on the far side of the pub.

“Well, we know Bob didn’t think the manor becoming a hotel and spa would be good for the pub’s business, but I bet David Susswich’s idea of a glamping site would have been. People staying there would have definitely used the pub for meals and drinks.”

“And John Pike?”

“Well, he could have lost his job. I’m sure Patrick would have put in a word with the new owners, but there would be no guarantees. Also, maybe they’re just old friends,” Poole said, shrugging. “They certainly seemed that way when I saw them together this morning.”

“I don’t think being someone’s friend means you’re willing to help them murder someone,” Anderson snorted.

Poole glanced at him. Although he was sure that Anderson was right, that most people wouldn’t murder for a friend no matter how close they were, there was something in the way he had said it that had made Poole think. Who were Anderson’s friends? Did he even have any? Poole couldn’t remember hearing of any outside of the station, and inside it he didn’t seem to be particularly close to anyone. There were a couple of younger constables who seemed to look up to him, laughing as Anderson made derogatory comments about other colleagues, but they were more like lackeys than real friends.

“Come on,” Poole said as he finished the last of his drink. “Let’s ask Bob just exactly why John Pike was here this morning.”

They moved to the bar where Bob and Vanessa were both busying behind it with unseen tasks.

“Thanks, that was lovely,” Poole said as he reached them.

“I’ll get this,” Anderson said, leaning forward and placing his card on the bar. Poole’s eyes widened in surprise as he said “thank you” in a stunned voice.

As Vanessa fetched the card machine and Anderson paid, Poole asked Bob if it was normal for John Pike to visit him so early in the morning.

“He comes over every so often before work, yeah,” Bob answered. His good spirits seemed to have wavered at the question, and there was an obvious note of caution in his voice.

“I’d imagine he starts work at the manor early?”

“I think so,” Bob shrugged, “you’d have to ask him.”

“So he just stops by for a chat some mornings? And what time was it he arrived this morning again?”

“I’ve already told you that this morning, around half-past eight, but I couldn’t say for sure. Why are you asking all these questions about John?”

“Just making sure we know exactly where everyone was this morning,” Poole answered in a light tone. Anderson returned from paying and after saying their goodbyes, they stepped out from the gloom and into the bright village once again.

“Well?” Anderson asked as they moved towards their car.

“Bob seemed defensive when I asked him about John Pike, but I guess that’s not surprising with his previous record. There’s something about the two of them meeting up that just doesn’t sit right with me. They strike me as the kind of people who would meet up with friends for a drink in the evening rather than sipping tea in the early hours. Especially as Bob wouldn’t finish work on the night before until late.”

“You think they might be in a relationship?”

Poole reached the car and his hand paused on the handle. “No, I hadn’t considered that actually,” he frowned, “but I guess we can’t rule it out.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

The microwave dinged, and Poole pulled out the plastic tray and pulled back the plastic cover. This immediately split into a thin strip rather than removing the whole lid as one. He put the microwaveable rice into the microwave and spent its two minutes cooking time picking away the cellophane while cursing. He had finally got the curry onto a plate and added the rice when his phone rang. As he flipped it over, it surprised him to see Anderson's name on the screen.

"I'm downstairs," he said as soon as Poole answered, "there's some sort of incident at the manor. Uniform are in attendance, but it could apply to the case."

Poole looked longingly at his curry and sighed. "Give me two minutes," he said and hung up before Anderson could protest.

A few minutes later, Anderson was speeding them through the country lanes leading to Stanton-on-Mead, in a way that Poole was sure was designed to annoy him.

"Can you go easy on the corners?" he said as he missed his mouth with a forkful of curry for the third time.

"I'm driving to the potential scene of a crime," Anderson replied coldly, "you're the one who's decided to turn my car into a café."

Poole shook his head slightly, but continued to eat from the Tupperware he had scraped his curry into before leaving. Anderson hadn't said anything outright about the meal being eaten en route, but he had rolled the window down and wrinkled his nose. He had also been taking corners with what Poole was convinced was malicious intent against him eating his dinner.

Poole managed to finish the last few mouthfuls as they pulled up the driveway of Stanton House, where two police cars brightened the area with their lights flashing silently.

A man was being handcuffed by the left-hand car and Poole recognised him as Bob Canter.

They jumped out of the car and headed toward the scene. Poole noticed David Susswich standing at the top of the steps with his father Patrick, both talking to a uniformed officer.

"What's going on here?" Anderson asked as he approached Bob Canter and Constable Morgan. Morgan's dour expression turned to Anderson, with the Welshman showing his usual lack of interest in the world around him.

"This man here was trying to get into the house," he drawled.

"What do you mean, get into the house? Break in?"

"The only thing I'm going to break is that bastard's legs!" Bob shouted, spitting with rage towards the figures at the top of the steps to the house.

For a moment, the change in the man took Poole back. He had always seemed so mild-mannered, but here he was, thrashing like a caged animal.

"Get him to the station," Anderson said to Morgan before heading towards the house, Poole in tow.

As they jogged up the steps towards the Susswiches, Poole could see that David Susswich had a split lip which he held a handkerchief to, his dark eyes hard with anger. His father looked more bewildered than anything, blinking in the strobing light of the remaining police car as he stared out at the night.

“Do you need a doctor?” Poole asked David as they reached them. He shook his head.

“No, I’d sooner just forget all this and have a stiff drink if it’s all the same to you?” he said bitterly, his eyes tracking the police car containing Bob Canter as it exited the driveway onto the road in the distance.

“What happened?” Anderson asked.

David’s eyes darted to his father, who seemed oblivious to their presence.

“Maybe we could talk alone?” David asked.

Poole nodded. “Constable Harper, why don’t you take Mr Susswich here through to the kitchen for a cup of tea?”

Harper nodded and took Patrick Susswich’s arm and led him, uncomplaining, back into the house.

“Is your father OK?” Poole asked.

“Shock, I think,” David said through a clenched jaw. “Listen, I don’t want to make a fuss about this.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have called the police,” Anderson said in a slightly irritated voice. “Explain what happened from the beginning, please.”

David seemed to look at them both properly for the first time since they had arrived. His face was unreadable, but his dark eyes which darted between them suggested there was some inner discussion taking place.

“Just a misunderstanding,” he said eventually. “I don’t want to press charges. My father called the police in a bit of a panic, but there’s nothing that needs to involve you.”

There was a slight pause as they waited for him to continue, and when he didn’t, Anderson spoke again.

“Mr Canter came here at night, apparently scared your father enough to call the police and presumably gave you that fat lip. We would like to know why.”

“Just a falling out,” David said, “these things happen.”

“This seems like more than just a falling out,” Poole said. “David, this is a murder enquiry. Helen was only murdered yesterday and now Bob is here attacking you! We need to know what’s going on.”

David pulled the handkerchief away from his lip and inspected it. Satisfied the flow of blood seemed to have stopped, he returned it into the pocket of his chinos and raised his chin.

“This has nothing to do with Helen’s death,” he said firmly.

“I think that’s for us to decide,” Anderson said.

“Well, you’ll get nothing more from me or my father on the matter,” David said, folding his arms.

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

“And he’s still saying nothing?” Brock asked.

“Nothing,” Anderson said bitterly.

“Well,” Brock said, sighing as he mopped up the last of the beans on his plate, “I guess we couldn’t expect anything else from him with his background. He’s probably used to not answering the police.” He leaned back, causing the plastic chair to creak under his weight.

Poole and Anderson sat across from him in Bexford Station’s canteen, having started early after a late night. Poole noticed that Anderson seemed just as fresh and alert as he always did with his neatly ironed shirt which stretched across his broad chest. Poole, on the other hand, could feel the bags under his eyes pulling his head down towards the table, and his shirt was probably the only thing in the room with more creases than his face.

Bob Canter had answered no comment to every question they had asked of him last night and had continued the theme this morning when they had arrived.

“I can’t understand why both of them are keeping quiet,” Poole said. “I mean, Bob makes sense. He’s the one who turned up at Stanton House swinging his fists, but why wouldn’t David Susswich tell us why he was so angry with him?”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to get barred from his local by pressing charges on the landlord?” Brock said.

“The way Bob was ranting at him last night, I doubt he’s going to be allowed back there in any case.”

“We need to speak to Vanessa Canter,” Anderson said.

“You do,” Brock nodded, “and I’d do it before her father gets home if I were you—you might get more out of her then. I’ll keep him here for a couple more hours and see if I can get anything out of him. That should give you time.”

“Thanks, sir,” Anderson said, jumping up from the table and heading for the door.

“He’s eager at least,” Brock said as Poole rose from his chair. “How’s it going?”

Poole smiled. “A work in progress.”

He caught up with Anderson in the small reception room of the police station, where Constable Roland Hale was leaning his considerable frame over the rather worn counter and handing Anderson a sheet of paper.

“And this came in just now?” Anderson asked.

“Yep,” Hale said, grinning, “bloke was all stuttering and stammering on the phone. Sounded so nervous I reckon he’s ready to confess!”

“What’s this?” Poole asked urgently.

“Horace Barrett called,” Anderson said as he looked at the sheet of paper in his hand, “says him and his wife need to talk to us urgently.”

“To confess!” Hale said, nodding knowingly.

“Shut it, Hale,” Anderson said before turning for the door.

They passed the drive to Stanton-on-Mead in silence. Anderson squinting in the early morning light as he guided the car through the tight lanes of Addervale, Poole replying to eight text messages from his mother. These were focused on a new range of scented candles that promise to enhance lovemaking and he was explaining, in no uncertain terms, that this

was not something anyone wanted to hear from their mother. Particularly when you'd just had a greasy bacon sandwich at the station canteen.

He looked up as they pulled into the village.

“So, who are we going to talk to first? Vanessa Canter or the Barretts?”

“Canter,” replied Anderson. “If the Barretts are about to confess, they can wait. I can't see those two being a flight risk.”

Poole smiled. “Now who's judging them based on appearances? They might have a small helicopter in their back garden waiting to escape.”

Poole wasn't sure, but he thought he saw one corner of Anderson's thin mouth rise slightly.

They pulled up outside The Finch, and Anderson was soon knocking on its slightly warped front door, causing some flakes of paint to flutter to the ground from it as he did so.

Vanessa Canter answered quickly, her dark eyes ringed with a lack of sleep and an abundance of worry.

“Have you brought Dad back?” she asked without greeting.

“Not yet,” Anderson said. “We need to ask you some questions.”

She seemed about to protest, but then sagged, nodded and turned back into the pub.

They sat at a table for four near the door with Vanessa facing them, turning a beer mat over and over in nervous hands.

“We need to know why your father was up at Stanton Hall last night,” Anderson said.

“You've arrested him. Why don't you ask him?”

“He's not saying anything,” Poole answered, “which doesn't look good for him. He assaulted David Susswich the day after Helen Susswich was murdered.”

“He had nothing to do with Helen dying!”

“Then tell us why he was at the Susswiches' house last night?”

“David isn’t even pressing charges, so what does it matter?!” she snapped angrily.

Poole frowned and glanced at Anderson, who was staring at the young woman with no obvious sign he had noticed what Poole had.

“How do you know he’s not pressing charges?” Poole asked.

Vanessa stared at him for a moment which stretched beyond what Poole felt normal before answering.

“They told me when I rang the police station.”

“If there’s some sort of argument happening between your father and the Susswiches, we need to know,” Anderson said. “We’ll find out anyway, and the sooner we can dismiss your father from having anything to do with it, the quicker we can leave you alone.”

Poole was struck with how much more sympathetic Anderson seemed to be with Vanessa than with the Barretts. Amazing what a pretty face could do.

Vanessa looked down at the beer mat that she still twirled in her slender fingers. When she looked up again, the confident and assured young woman seemed to have been replaced by a fearful child. She closed her eyes, composing herself, and when she opened them again the confident young woman was back. Although, a little more cracked around the edges than before.

“The morning of Helen’s murder...”

She was halted by the door of the pub swinging open with some force and a thickset man in a dark blue suit entering with a glowering expression.

“Don’t say another word, Vanessa,” he boomed in a thick London accent. “Is my client being charged with anything?” he barked at Anderson and Poole.

“Your client?” Poole answered in confusion, the sheer presence of this man having thrown him absolutely off track.

Anderson rose and stepped in front of the man, his broad chest pushed out so far he could have rested a pint of the pub's finest on it.

"Who are you?" Anderson asked coldly.

"Dennis Fleck," the man answered, "I'm Miss Canter's legal representative and she's not saying another word unless you intend to press charges."

Poole looked back to Vanessa, but he could see it was already a lost cause. She had the look of someone who had been adrift at sea and had just found a plank of wood to cling onto.

A few moments later, Poole and Anderson were back outside the pub with Anderson turning the air blue in frustration.

Poole looked up at the clouds drifting lazily across the pale blue morning sky.

"Do you know what I find odd about that?" he said, when there was a break in swearing from Anderson.

"What?"

"Bob Canter didn't get this lawyer into the station when he was being questioned. Why didn't he get him to go to the station this morning? Instead, he's here making sure we don't talk to Vanessa. I mean, he could just be being protective of his daughter."

Anderson cracked his knuckles, something Poole had noticed he did when frustrated.

"Or he thinks she needs protecting more than him," he said coldly.

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Brock closed the door of the interview room behind him and rubbed his face with his hands. Bob Canter would not say a word. He'd probably had enough practise at stonewalling police in interrogation rooms in his youth to be as quiet as a Trappist monk when he wanted to be.

"Sir?"

Brock looked up at Constable Sanders, who was hurrying along the corridor towards him with an expression he recognised.

"Tell me you have something good?"

"I think so," she grinned, passing him the sheet of paper. "Helen Susswich had hired a private investigator."

Brock scanned over the details on the paper.

"Jack Downton?"

"That's right. She hired him to look into Henry Chambers and the golf club deal he was supposed to be organising with the Susswiches."

"And you've spoken to him?"

"Yep, he says he only just found out Helen Susswich had died and called in to us. He only ever dealt with her and says, from the way she spoke, that he didn't think the rest of her family knew. He followed

Chambers on occasions until he was supposed to be meeting investors and things. As far as he could tell, those meetings never happened.”

“What do you mean never happened?”

“He says Chambers would just go to his sister’s house in Oxfordshire for a few days and then come back again.”

“I think it’s time we got a warrant to go through Mr Chambers’ finances, don’t you? Even if he has nothing to do with Helen Susswich’s death, there might be a fraud case there. Have we got the phone records for the Susswich home yet?”

“Yes sir, came in this morning. Davies is going through them now.” She turned to go and then paused. “How is she, sir?”

Brock sighed, but then smiled. “Feeling as though she going to explode at any minute.”

“Fingers crossed that doesn’t happen then.” Sanita laughed before turning and heading off down the corridor.

Brock followed her slowly, pulling out his phone and checking it for what felt like the hundredth time that morning already.

He pushed open the door of the main office and felt a thud on the other side before it gave way. Stuffing his phone back in his pocket, he peered round the door to see Constable Davies sprawled on the thin carpet.

“You OK, Constable?”

“Fine, sir,” he answered, taking Brock’s offered hand and hauling himself up. “We’ve just had a report in about Stanton-on-Mead, sir, another body’s been found!”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

The Barretts had welcomed Poole and Anderson into their home the way a particularly juicy fly might invite a spider. Both wore washed-out, pale expressions of nervous anxiety and murmured offerings of tea and biscuits in high-pitched little yelps.

“You called the station?” Poole said when they had sat in silence for a few moments on either side of the floral china tea set which sat on the coffee table. “You had something you wanted to tell us?”

“It’s about the morning of—” Horace began, but his voice faltered. He cleared his throat and straightened as though trying to steel himself. “The morning poor Helen Susswich was killed.”

Poole and Anderson waited expectantly while the Barretts looked at each other and clasped hands.

“I’m afraid, we were being blackmailed,” Horace said, his voice quivering with emotion.

“About your involvement in Mrs Susswich’s death?” Anderson asked.

“What?!” Horace gaped. “No! We had nothing to do with that!”

“But you said it was about the morning of the murder?”

“Yes, but it’s not what you think!” He turned to Mavis, exasperated.

“It’s OK, dear, we have to come clean or we’ll have this hanging over us forever.”

Horace nodded and sucked up a deep breath. He turned back to Anderson and Poole with a more composed expression.

“I’m afraid we broke the law that morning, and so we lied to you about our whereabouts.” He paused and looked at his wife before turning back to them. “Oh my, is that another crime? To lie to the police?”

“Let’s just focus on one crime at a time, shall we?” Poole said. “What exactly did you do?”

Horace swallowed and somehow seemed to pale even more.

“My wife and I enjoy outdoor pursuits,” he said eventually.

“OK...” Poole offered when no more seemed to be forthcoming.

“I’m sure to you we must look like a couple of old fossils, but I can assure you we still enjoy a very fulfilling sex life.”

There was a soft clicking noise which Poole was sure could be attributed to both his and Anderson’s respective jaws dropping. The sudden change of subject had thrown him to such an extent that all he managed as a follow-up question was, “Pardon?”

Horace seemed to have regained some of his composure now, as though he felt the worst was over.

“My wife and I enjoy having relations outside in nature.”

There was another silence so thick you could have chewed it.

“You mean you go dogging?” Anderson said in a frankly awestruck voice.

Poole looked at him, surprised that his new partner was aware of the slang phrase.

“No!” Horace cried, raising his chin, “We don’t hang around in car parks waiting for strangers! This is between my wife and I and nature!”

Poole tried to collect his thoughts and bring the interview back to some form of professionalism.

“So on the morning of the murder, you were having sex outside?” he said, hoping to make the sentence sound as normal as possible. This was

tricky when Mavis was topping up his china teacup and sliding the biscuit plate closer to him.

“Yes, in Forgan Woods.”

“You were in the woods the morning of the murder?” Anderson said incredulously. “And you’ve been withholding this information?!”

“We were worried we would be arrested for public indecency,” Horace answered, “but we didn’t hold back anything that would have been helpful towards poor Helen’s murder.”

“You heard nothing? Saw no one?” Poole tried to clarify.

“We heard someone when we first got there,” Mavis said. “We didn’t see anything though as soon as we realised we weren’t alone, I’m afraid we hid behind a bush. After a while they seemed to go back the way they had come.”

“What time was this? Anderson asked.

“About seven, I should think?” Horace answered.

“Maybe seven thirty by then,” Mavis added.

Anderson’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he strode out of the room to answer it.

“You said someone was blackmailing you about this?” Poole continued.

“Yes,” Horace said. “He always was a rather silly young man, but I never expected this of him. He came here and demanded five thousand pounds! Can you believe it?!”

“Who?” Poole asked, getting annoyed.

“Stuart Pike. He said he’d seen us going to the woods that day and knew all about what we ‘got up to’ in there. He said we’d be arrested for indecency and you might think we’d had something to do with the murder, because we lied, I mean.”

“We decided that we weren’t going to let him bully us like that,” Mavis said defiantly.

Anderson came back into the room, his blue eyes ablaze.

“Stuart Pike has been murdered.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Brock watched John Pike from a distance. There was a man who would need to be watched. Brock recognised the cold, hard eyes of someone who has had their world torn apart, but before they were able to grieve, they wanted someone to pay.

“You don’t need Ron to tell you what killed him,” Sheila said from his side. Sheila led the forensics team. A stocky, bustling woman who was as efficient as her manner was brusque. She was also right. There would be no need to wait for the coroner Ronald Smith to determine cause of death. The large, gaping wound to Stuart Pike’s chest and the shotgun which lay beside him made it all too clear.

“Once the photos are all done, I’ll take prints off the gun first thing,” Sheila continued. “Hopefully whoever did this was too panicked to think of wiping it.”

“We’ll need the serial number as well. Even though every other house in the county seems to have an unregistered shotgun, we might as well try.”

“No need,” Sanita said as she joined them. “John Pike says it’s his.”

Brock frowned. “He could tell just by looking at it?”

“I asked if he was sure, he just growled back that he knew his guns.”

“So,” Brock said thoughtfully, “maybe it was Stuart who brought the gun out here.” He looked up and down the narrow path which led along the

edge of the field. In the distance, he could see where it led past the pub. He and Poole had stood there just two days ago on the morning of another murder.

“I don’t think suicide is likely, sir,” Sanita said, “People don’t tend to shoot themselves in the chest.”

Brock gave a small laugh. “That’s not what I meant, Constable. I think Stuart Pike might have brought the gun for protection. Maybe he was going to meet someone he knew was dangerous.”

“He’s been hit on the head as well,” Sheila said, crouching down by the body.

“It looks like we’ll need Ron after all,” Brock said grimly. “We’ll need to know if that was caused before he was shot or not. Anyone hear the shot?” he said, turning to Sanita.

“We’re still canvassing the village, but a few said they heard it. To be honest though, shooting around here is so common no one paid any attention to it. We’re not going to get a confident timing, but it was definitely in the early hours. That’s when a lot of shooting goes on around here, apparently.”

“Let’s find out who goes shooting at that time, maybe they saw something.” He looked up at John Pike, who was still leaning against the stone wall of the field with a far-off expression on his face.

“What’s he said so far?”

“Just that he didn’t realise his son had left the house this morning. He came out for a walk and found him here. He had a gun on him as well, it’s been bagged for evidence.”

“A lot of people seem to go for walks with a gun around here,” Brock said gruffly.

“It’s the country.” Sanita shrugged.

Brock’s eyes narrowed in the sunlight as he gazed across the field. “I want this area combed, get some uniform on it. They probably stuck to the

path, but you never know.”

“Tell me something, Constable, is it just me, or does that wound suggest that he was shot close range?”

He saw Sanita turn to the body in the corner of his eye. He had forced himself to have a long look when he had arrived, but he had no desire to look again. Once was enough.

“Definitely, sir,” Sanita replied. “You wouldn’t get a mess like that unless the killer was standing bloody close.”

Brock nodded, marvelling, not for the first time, at Constable Sander’s seemingly iron stomach for handling the gruesome.

“OK, I guess I’d better have a word with the father,” Brock said, hitching up his trousers. In the back of his mind, the word *father* had hit some sort of warning bell. He would be a father soon. How would he feel if it was him leaning on that wall? His child just fifty feet away and lying in a pool of blood. He shuddered and put the thought from his mind as he made his way to John Pike.

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Mavis gave a small cry as her hand rushed to her mouth.
“He’s dead?!” Horace said, his eyes wide.
Anderson looked at them, seeming to realise that he had given away this information rather too freely.

“When was the last time you saw Stuart Pike?” he said aggressively.

Poole was too shocked himself to make any judgement, and let the scene play out.

“It,” Horace began, then paused and swallowed before continuing, “it was yesterday evening. He came to the house at around eight.”

“And that was when he demanded money from you?”

Horace nodded.

“And was there an altercation?”

“What? No!” Horace said, sitting upright, “I told him we’d pay, I didn’t want any trouble.”

“But you had no intention of paying? You called us instead?”

Horace turned to his wife, who was sobbing quietly, and took her hand again.

“We talked it over and decided that we couldn’t live our lives under the shadow of him threatening us, so we called the station this morning.”

“Which you may have done just to divert attention away from the fact that you disposed of another problem,” Anderson said flatly.

Horace glanced frantically between the two detectives. “What...?”

“Helen Susswich stood in the way of your comfortable job running the glamping site at the manor, and now she’s not in the picture. Stuart Pike could place you near the scene of this murder, and was attempting to blackmail you about an embarrassing secret. He’s now out of the picture as well. It seems a lot of your problems are just going away recently, doesn’t it?”

Horace gaped, his open mouth wobbling slightly as his wife continued to cry.

“You can’t think that we...”

“Don’t leave the village,” Anderson snapped, “we’ll be wanting to talk to you again.” He turned and left the room.

Poole rose, and unable to continue Anderson’s aggressive approach with this sorry couple, gave Horace a small apologetic smile as he left.

“How did he die?” he asked Anderson once he’d caught up with him on the road.

“It sounds like a shotgun to the chest.”

“Well, we know it wasn’t Bob Canter. He was in a cell all night.”

“His daughter wasn’t though,” Anderson answered. “Maybe that’s why he was so keen to get her lawyered up rather than himself? Maybe Vanessa got sick and tired of this Stuart following her around like a lovesick puppy. Why would Vanessa have killed Helen Susswich though?”

“Who says the killer is the same person?”

“Oh, come on, no one’s going to commit a murder two days after someone else has in a small village like this,” Anderson said with a snort of derision. “They’d know we’d be looking at everything closely.”

Poole was silent for a moment before he answered. “Not unless someone decided to use the opportunity of the first murder to cover up one

of their own. Then, maybe, they could pin both murders on the culprit of the first.”

Anderson glanced at Poole with a slightly surprised expression. “I see the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree. You’ve got a criminal mind like your father.”

Poole looked at him sharply, but there was none of the sneer on his strong features that usually accompanied such comments. Instead, he was smiling in an almost good-natured way. Again, the thought rose in his mind that Anderson was trying to be friendly, but didn’t have much practise.

“What I don’t understand,” Anderson continued, seemingly unaware of Poole studying him, “is what the two have to do with each other.”

Poole nodded. “We know that Helen Susswich’s murder was planned at least a little. Someone took the stick from the Aunt Sally game at the pub and, knowing her route, met her in the woods or near it and killed her.”

“It does seem unlikely someone would have been carrying one of those sticks coincidentally and then used it in a fit of rage or something. The most obvious answer, is that the Barretts killed Stuart Pike for trying to blackmail them.”

“But there was no need if they were going to come clean to us about it, anyway. Besides, if Stuart Pike had a taste for blackmail, maybe the Barretts weren’t the only people he was trying to squeeze.”

“Which brings me back to Vanessa Canter. We saw her and Stuart talking in the pub yesterday all hush-hush. Maybe he was trying to blackmail her using something to do with her father.”

“According to Bob Canter, Stuart had a thing for Vanessa, so I doubt he’d blackmail her.”

“Unless what he was asking for wasn’t money,” Anderson said pointedly as he steered the car alongside the curb to park behind a marked police car.

“Looks like crime scene are already here,” he said, nodding at a white van across the road.

Poole continued the conversation as they climbed out of the car.

“If Stuart Pike was blackmailing Vanessa over the murder of Helen Susswich, what was her motive for that first crime?” He paused, swore, and slapped the top of the car.

“What is it?” Anderson asked.

“If she did have a motive to hate the Susswiches, it’s shared by her father. That was where we arrested him, wasn’t it, trying to beat the living daylights out of David Susswich!”

Anderson nodded. “So the Canters have reason to hate the Susswiches, which they’re not telling us about at the moment. Helen Susswich is killed and then that same night, Bob Canter attacks David Susswich.”

“Then the day after,” Poole said, picking up the thread, “we see Vanessa have a whispered conversation with Stuart Pike, with them both looking at us a fair bit, and he’s killed later that night. Also, we know Stuart was someone who’s not above a bit of blackmail.”

“And Vanessa gets lawyered up first thing this morning.”

They looked at each other for a moment over the roof of the car, both feeling they had the start of something. That things were starting to become clearer.

As they made their way over to the taped-off crime scene, it was clear that most of the work that needed to be done was already taken care of. The small yellow markers laid out by Sheila’s forensic team to identify points of interest to be photographed were already being picked up. Poole saw Ronald Smith, the coroner, talking to Sheila on the far side and decided to avoid going that way. Instead, he pointed in the direction of Brock and Sanita, who had turned away from the dejected figure of John Pike and were moving along the wall of the field.

“Well,” Brock said as the two groups reached each other, “we’re not getting much out of him. All he’s saying is that he didn’t know Stuart had gone out this morning. He left the house assuming his son was in his room and then found him here.”

“And he’s been shot?” Poole asked.

“Yep, with his own shotgun. Well, his father’s anyway.”

“You think his father might have done this?” Anderson said.

“No,” Brock said firmly. “He says he owns four shotguns and Stuart must have taken one with him, and I believe him.”

“Stuart didn’t own his own gun?” Poole asked.

“No,” Sanita replied, “I asked him that. He said Stuart was never much one for guns.”

“But he took one with him this morning,” Poole said meaningfully, “maybe he thought he’d need one today for some reason?”

“Well, it didn’t work out that well for him,” Anderson said.

“We think he was first knocked out by a blow to the head, then shot with his own gun,” Brock said, shooting a slightly disapproving look at Anderson.

“Bloody hell,” Poole said with feeling. “That’s cold.”

“It suggests it was someone he knew for him to let them get that close. Unless they had a throwing arm like a piston.”

“Do we know how many shots were fired?” Poole asked Brock.

“Just one, the second cartridge was still in the gun.”

“Strange,” Poole said, “he had the gun. When they came at him you’d think he’d get at least one shot off.”

Brock nodded, and Sanita shrugged. “His dad said he wasn’t much of a lad for guns,” she said. “Maybe he was too scared or just too clumsy with it to get a shot off.”

“Either way, we need to focus on why on earth anyone would want to kill Stuart Pike.”

“We think we can help there,” Anderson said, his blue eyes darting to Poole’s.

He recounted their thoughts on Vanessa Canter and their conversation with the Barretts.

“Right,” Brock said, in a tone that Poole recognised as one of quiet authority that slipped in as the end of a case came closer. “You’d better get yourself over to the pub sharpish and bring her in. Maybe the thought of her in a cell will make her father more inclined to talk.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

As Poole and Anderson climbed from the car outside The Finch, Dennis Fleck emerged from the pub's doorway. The lawyer gave them a thin smile and moved towards them, hands splayed out before him.

"Gentlemen, I'm glad you've come back."

Poole raised his eyebrows at this, shooting Anderson a surprised look. Anderson returned his gaze with one that suggested he could see a trick coming.

"I think it's time we had a little chat and cleared some things up. So I can help you in this terrible murder case."

"Double murder case," Anderson said.

Fleck's smile didn't leave his lips, but his eyes became hard.

"Someone else bought it?" he asked in his gruff London accent.

"Someone else was killed," Anderson confirmed.

Fleck looked at the ground, nodding for a moment in thought. When he looked up again, the smile was back on his face.

"This happened last night, I take it?"

"It did," Poole replied.

"Then Bob's in the clear. You don't get two murders close together like this without them being related. And he can't have done this business last

night because you've got him locked up."

"But maybe an accomplice could have?" Anderson said sharply.

Fleck laughed. "Don't start looking at me, lad, I was in London last night and have plenty of witnesses to prove it."

"Vanessa, then?" Poole said.

"Right," Fleck said, slapping his hands together and rubbing them in front of him. "Now we're getting down to it. Vanessa here hasn't quite been telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but," he held up a hand to pause Anderson, who had begun to ask questions, "she had nothing to do with any of this. She's just a young girl in love who was going behind her father's back. Not exactly the first time we've heard that story, hey, lads?" He winked at them salaciously.

There was a moment's silence where Anderson and Poole stood in slight bafflement before Poole managed, "OK?"

"Right," Fleck said, rubbing his hands together again. "Why don't we nip inside and Vanessa can tell you all about it over a cup of tea?" He turned and walked back to the pub without waiting for an answer.

"We were told to bring her back to the station for questioning," Anderson said without moving.

"Yes, but if she's willing to tell us everything and cooperate here with her lawyer present, I don't want to risk taking her to the station where she might get cold feet. Let's hear what she has to say."

"We've got orders," Anderson said in an almost pleading voice.

Poole turned to him and was surprised to see him looking even more rigid than usual. His piercing blue eyes staring at the door of the pub as though it was a portal to hell.

"You can't just blindly follow orders," Poole said, "Brock wouldn't want us to do that. He'd want us to take advantage of the situation and find out as much of what's been going on here as possible. We can still take her

to the station afterwards.” He started towards the pub, stopping at the door and turning back to Anderson, who hadn’t moved. “Come on!”

This seemed to snap Anderson out of whatever trance he had been put under, and he followed Poole into the now familiar gloom of The Finch.

Fleck was sat at a table of four and Vanessa was approaching with a tray holding four cups of tea. They took their seats as she placed them on the table, tossed the tray onto another table, and sat down.

“Right then,” Fleck said, picking up his mug. “Tell them what happened the morning this woman was knocked off first, Vanessa.”

She picked up her mug, holding it in front of her like a shield, as her eyes flitted between the two detectives.

“I’ve been seeing David Susswich,” she said, blurting out the words in a rush. Poole and Anderson said nothing, but exchanged a glance.

“I know he’s a bit older than me, but we’re in love!” she said loudly, clearly noting the expressions on the detectives’ faces. At nineteen, Vanessa was twenty-one years David’s junior.

“Just tell them what happened that morning, love,” Fleck said, slurping at his tea noisily.

“David had told me that Patrick and Helen would both be out in the morning. Patrick at some meeting and Helen on her usual dog walk. If I timed it right, I could go over and we could have some time together.”

“So you were at Stanton House the morning Helen Susswich was murdered?” Poole asked.

“Yes, but I had nothing to do with her being killed! I got to the house early and waited until I’d seen Helen and Patrick leave, then went in.”

“They left together?” Poole asked.

“No, Patrick left first. He went up towards the heath and about twenty minutes later, Helen came out with the dog and followed him.”

“What time was this?” Anderson asked.

“About seven.”

“When I got to the pub that morning,” Poole said, “I was talking to your father when you came out of the pub.”

Vanessa nodded. “I was only up at the house about an hour.” She blushed slightly as she seemed to realise how this sounded. “It’s not easy for us, we have to snatch time together when we can.”

“Why?” Anderson asked.

“Because Patrick wouldn’t approve for starters, and David was worried he’d stop listening to him completely about what to do with the estate.”

“It sounds like he had done that anyway. Patrick and Helen were planning to sell up.”

“David was sure his dad wouldn’t actually go through with it. He thought he’d see sense in the end.”

“I’m guessing your dad didn’t approve either?” Poole said, thinking of the previous night when Bob Canter had turned up at the big house, intent on causing David Susswich bodily harm.

“I was worried about David,” Vanessa said. “I knew he didn’t have an alibi for Helen’s murder because he was trying to protect me.”

“Or himself,” Fleck added, making Vanessa glare at him.

“If he was just trying to look after himself, he would have just said. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Maybe he thought your father wouldn’t see it like that,” Fleck added with a tone that Poole didn’t like.

“I knew we had to tell the truth, so I told Dad we were together that morning. I can get in and out of my bedroom window, as it’s over the coal shed by the lane at the side of the pub. Dad was furious and marched straight over there to have it out with David. I didn’t think he’d be violent though.”

“He wasn’t violent,” Fleck interjected, trying to protect his other client. “Mr Susswich wasn’t harmed, and he’s pressing no charges.”

There was a pause, and Anderson looked at Poole with a blank expression that suggested he wasn't sure there was much more to be gained here, but Poole was frowning. His thoughts on something Vanessa had said that had jarred something in his mind.

"Did you say that Helen followed Patrick out of the house?" he asked.

"Yeah, he came out first, and she was about twenty minutes later."

"No, I mean the direction. You said that she followed him, do you mean she was heading along the path to the heath like Patrick did?"

"Yes, does that matter?" she said, her large, round eyes flicking between them.

"Come on," Poole said to Anderson as he rose from his chair.

"I take it Mr Canter will be released from custody shortly?" Fleck said with a grin.

"If anything," Anderson called back, "this means we can't verify he was at home that morning."

"Oh, come on!" Fleck's voice called out as they left the pub.

"He's right," Anderson said once they were out of earshot, "we'll have to release him."

"It doesn't matter," Poole answered as they reached the car and climbed in, "we've got a new lead."

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CHAPTER
THIRTY

Henry Chambers' house was a reflection of his personality within the village. Unlike the worn and speckled stone most houses in the village were made from, his house was a blend of glass and wood. Its slanted front the whimsy of an architect who apparently had never visited Stanton-on-Mead to understand what would be in keeping in the small village.

Henry Chambers was wide-eyed in surprise when he opened the door to find the two detectives, but recovered quickly into his salesperson's smile.

"Gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

"Can we come in for a moment?" Poole said. "There's a couple of things we'd like to ask you."

Henry's smile flickered slightly. "Actually, it's not a good time." He stepped outside of the house and closed the door behind him. "But if you're quick."

"The morning that Helen Susswich was killed," Poole continued, "you met with Patrick Susswich on the heath, correct?"

"I've told you this," Henry said. "I met with him and then walked back to the road and drove home."

"And which way did Patrick go when you'd finished talking?"

"The same way he'd come, from the path down to the manor."

“And Helen came from the same direction?”

“She...” Henry paused, his eyes widening in horror. “What do you mean Helen? She wasn’t there.”

“Oh, I think she was,” Poole said. “I think she followed her husband to find out where he was going and saw him talking to you. I’d imagine she wondered why you were having secret meetings in the countryside and so wanted to talk to you herself.”

Chambers said nothing now. Instead, he stared back with his mouth slightly open and his skin paling.

“So what happened then?” Poole continued. “Did you decide that Helen was going to get in the way of your plans to rinse every last penny from her husband? Did you decide she needed to be dealt with?”

“What?!” Henry stuttered, a look of absolute horror on his face now. “I would never! When I left she was alive and well!”

“So you saw her that morning?” Anderson interjected.

Chambers closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Yes,” he said in a voice thick with resignation, “she popped out at me as I got back to my car. Damn near gave me a heart attack when that dog of hers barked at me.”

“Go on,” Anderson said flatly.

Henry sighed. “She wanted to know how much Patrick had given me to sort out the golf course deal,” he said. “She was angry, ranting all sorts of nonsense, she said she was going to go to the police.”

“She’d figured out that you were conning them,” Poole said, “so you decided to silence her.”

“What?! No!” Henry shouted. “I told her she had it all wrong, that I was close to securing the deal.”

“Which she knew was a load of rubbish,” Anderson said.

Chambers looked at him, his mouth opening to deliver a denial and more of the smooth sales patter that came so naturally to him, but then

stopped. His shoulders slumped as he took a deep breath before speaking.

“At first, I really thought I could help him. I have a friend I went to school with who works out in the Middle East. He’d said his boss was looking for investments in the UK and I came up with the idea for the golf course. I knew Patrick was struggling, David had told me in *The Finch* one night, so I approached him. We needed to get plans drawn up, a proper business proposal, so he gave me some money to get the ball rolling.” He shook his head as he stared at the ground. “I thought it was all going to work out. Patrick could keep the estate, I’d get a nice cut for putting it all together.”

“And what happened?” Poole asked.

“The investors weren’t interested,” he shrugged, “simple as that. They moved on, cut all communication. My friend just said they weren’t keen.”

“But rather than tell Patrick, you decided to keep him on the hook a little longer,” Poole said.

“I thought I could find another backer!” Henry said, his voice rising to almost a whine. “I started arranging meetings with people to see if I could get some interest, but no one was biting. Then I couldn’t even get a meeting with anyone. Patrick was still funding me, so I started going away for a few days at a time. To make him think it was all still OK.”

“But you weren’t actually meeting with anyone?” Anderson asked.

Chambers shook his head again. “I’d just stay in a cheap hotel for a couple of nights and then come home.” He stepped back to his front door and pushed it open to reveal cardboard boxes lining the hall. “I wasn’t just trying to rip him off, I was trying to make it work. I put everything I had into this bloody thing as well. Golf course designers, architects to draw up the clubhouse, lawyers to set up a company and look at the insurance and all that nonsense.” He swallowed, his eyes still fixed on the cardboard boxes in his hallway. “I’m going to lose the house,” he said quietly.

When it was clear Henry wasn't going to say any more, Poole prompted him.

"Tell us what happened with Helen that morning."

"Nothing happened," Henry said. "Not in the way you mean, anyway. She was angry, told me she wanted me to leave Patrick alone and return the money. I told her the money was gone, that I was still trying to make the deal work." He paused, taking another deep breath. "She laughed at me and said she would go to the police if I didn't sort it out."

"And then?"

"And then nothing!" Henry said. "Honestly, I didn't touch her. She told me to sort it out, turned around and then marched back towards the house."

"She didn't go towards the woods?" Anderson asked.

"You can't really from the heath, there's a big hedge in the way. You have to take the footpath down towards the house and then turn off. I guess that's why she was hiding by my car. She didn't want Patrick to see that she'd followed him."

"And then what did you do?"

"I got in my car and drove home." He shrugged. "Whatever happened to her afterwards, was nothing to do with me."

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CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

“Paperwork,” Brock said gruffly into his phone.

“Paperwork?” Poole replied, looking across at Anderson and Sanita, the three of them standing around the speakerphone back at the station.

“Yes, paperwork,” Brock repeated. “Right now, everything we have is based on village gossip combined with the fact that half the bloody village seems to have been wandering about doing who knows what on the morning of the murder. There’s got to be something more than that. Whoever did this, took that stick from the Aunt Sally game to those woods with intent. This wasn’t someone losing their temper in the heat of the moment. Someone had been intent on attacking Helen Susswich for at least as long as it takes to walk from the pub to those woods. I want you to go over everything we have on everyone who could have been involved and turn over every stone until you find something squirming. Let me know if you find anything.” He hung up before any of them could reply and turned to Laura.

“What’s happening?”

“Nothing!” she said, laughing. “It was just a twinge. I am growing a human here, you know?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Once is a twinge, you’ve had three or four now. We need to time them.”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll start timing what is probably gas, and you put the kettle on and make me a tea.”

“How’s the case going?” she asked as he fiddled with the kettle and she brought up a stopwatch app on her phone.

Brock sighed. “I’m worried about leaving it to Poole and Anderson.”

“Are they still not getting on?”

“Actually, they don’t seem to be at each other’s throats like normal.”

“Sounds like progress.”

“Hopefully.” He nodded. “I’m more worried about the lack of progress on the case. You heard me on the phone—so far all they have is a load of gossiping villagers and people trying to keep secrets.”

Laura laughed. “You’re the one always telling me that’s what villages around here are like. Gossip and secrets.”

“They are!” Brock said, waving his hands in frustration. “You can’t move for people lying to you about something or someone just because seven years ago their neighbour’s dog dug up their rosebush or something.”

As if on cue, Indy leapt up from his bed and ran at Brock, his tail thrashing excitedly as he jumped up.

“Must be your dinner time,” Brock said, sliding the finished tea across towards Laura before busying himself with the dog food.

“Let’s go for a drive,” Laura said as he placed the bowl down for Indy, who attacked the food.

“A drive? Where?”

“To this Stanton-on-Mead place.”

“What? Why?”

Laura took a sip of her tea and sighed. “Because I’m the size of a cow and haven’t left the house in days, and you are driving me mad about this case. You’ve talked about it so much I feel like I’ve been listening to some

radio drama or something. I might as well see the place. Anyway, it's supposed to be pretty, isn't it?"

"It is." Brock nodded thoughtfully. "I have to say, I wouldn't mind going around the area once more—maybe something will click."

"Maybe I'll discover the vital clue." Laura laughed. "Now come on, help get this cow in the car."

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CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

“We know that Stuart Pike was trying to blackmail people over their whereabouts on the morning of the murder,” Anderson said.

He was perched awkwardly on one of the small wooden chairs that were dotted around the nooks and crannies of the Mop & Bucket pub in Bexford. Awkward, partly because his large frame wasn’t built for such a small seat, but also because he felt he was in enemy territory. Poole had told him that this was where he and Brock often came to review a case and go over the facts, and had regretted it immediately. Anderson had reacted with flared nostrils and a stiffened posture that screamed discomfort.

“We only know for sure that he was blackmailing the Barretts,” Poole replied, “because they told us as much.”

“And whoever killed him,” Anderson retorted. “What other reason would there be for killing him?”

“OK,” Poole conceded, “so it’s likely he blackmailed at least two people.”

“Unless the Barretts killed him and Helen Susswich,” Anderson said.

Poole nodded in thought.

“What I don’t understand is the mixed signals with the murder itself.”

“What do you mean?” Anderson said as he turned his pint of Bexford Gold around on the table. He still hadn’t taken a single sip. Poole had

insisted he have a pint of the locally made ale, which was also another tradition of his and Brocks when attempting to solve a difficult case. So far, he hadn't taken a sip.

"Helen Susswich was killed with a stick from the Aunt Sally game at the pub," Poole said. "I doubt it just happened to be lying around in the woods, which means someone took it there intending to use it."

"OK." Anderson shrugged.

"But if her murder was planned, why take a stick from the pub? You're in a wood for goodness's sake, there are sticks and logs all over the ground!"

Anderson's brow furrowed as he thought about this. "Could there be another reason someone would have taken the stick? Practise, maybe?"

Poole looked at him, eyebrows raised. "Don't you think they would have just asked Bob Canter if they could borrow one? In any case, I doubt anyone is so competitive on the team that they want to practise at home." Poole watched Anderson, expecting to see some annoyance at having his idea dismissed, but instead all he saw was deep concentration. Clearly his mind was now focussed on the problem in front of them and nothing else.

"OK," Anderson said, "so let's assume the stick was taken with the intention of murdering Helen Susswich. That must point to either Bob or Vanessa Canter."

"Yes," Poole agreed, "but Vanessa has an alibi from David Susswich, and Bob from John Pike."

"Not for the entire time, though. Vanessa could have found Helen in the woods on her way back from Stanton House and done it then."

"She would have had to have taken the stick, left it somewhere while she went and met David Susswich, and then picked it up again before finding Helen. In any case, what motive does she have?"

"Maybe Helen found out about her and David and threatened to put a stop to it?"

“Could she though?” Poole asked. “They’re both grown adults.”

“Maybe she was going to persuade Patrick to cut David out of his will or something?”

“It just seems unlikely,” Poole said. “The other option is, it was Bob Canter.” He shook his head. “But that doesn’t make sense either.”

“Why?”

“When he was younger, he was involved in all sorts. We know he was arrested for being a getaway driver, and you saw his lawyer. As dodgy as they come. He’s still protected somehow. The real reason is, do you think someone like that would be stupid enough to plan a murder using a weapon from his own pub? With his past, he’d be the first person we’d look at.”

Anderson nodded thoughtfully, still turning his glass.

“Are you going to drink that or not?” Poole asked.

Anderson’s bright blue eyes fixed him with a hard stare, before raising the glass to his lips and taking the smallest of sips. His expression moved from annoyance, to confusion, and then surprise.

“That’s actually really good.”

“I told you.” Poole grinned.

“If someone planned it,” Anderson said, moving the conversation back to the case, “why wouldn’t they have taken the stick away with them?”

“Maybe they panicked and just forgot?”

“Or maybe they wanted it to be found?” Anderson said. “There were no fingerprints on it. They could have wiped it or worn gloves and left it there on purpose to point to Bob Canter.”

Poole nodded slowly. “Because whoever it was knew of his past, so he would be the obvious person to point to in a small village like this.”

“So it was premeditated,” Anderson said. “Someone planned to kill Helen Susswich that morning and carried it out.”

Poole nodded. “But what they didn’t plan on was Stuart Pike somehow seeing, or finding out.”

Anderson nodded. "He tried to blackmail them like he did with the Barretts, and the murderer dealt with him as well."

"He took his shotgun out, but somehow that wasn't enough and he was hit on the head, just like Helen, and then shot with his own gun," Poole said.

They fell into a thoughtful silence, both sipping from their beers until they were gone.

"None of this gives us any idea who might have actually done it though," Anderson said.

"Nope," Poole agreed, before a movement through the window behind Anderson caught his eye. A woman with blonde hair was facing away from the glass, talking to a friend. For a moment, he thought it was Laura Brock, but as the woman turned to say goodbye to her friend, he realised the profile was all wrong.

Something at the back of his mind flashed back to looking through the pub window, and then to something Anderson had said about the death of Stuart Pike.

"Oh, bloody hell," he said softly.

"What?" Anderson asked.

"We need to get to Stanton-on-Mead right now." He stood up, his eyes wide. "I think I know who killed Helen Susswich."

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CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

“You can’t just drive down their driveway,” Brock said.

“Isn’t that what driveways are for?” Laura answered.

“Yes, but his wife’s just been murdered! How’s he going to feel if he finds I’m on a sightseeing trip with the family?”

“Oh, just tell him I’m an officer and you were checking everything was safe or something. Anyway, I just want to see the house. I’ll go far enough so I can see it and then turn around.”

Brock sighed, knowing he would not win against a determined pregnant woman, particularly one who was in control of the vehicle.

Laura turned the car into the driveway of Stanton House and headed down the gentle slope when a high-pitched screeching noise came from the engine.

“Oh crap,” Laura said, “I forgot about this noise. You said you were going to sort it this week.”

“I know, I know,” Brock said, “Don’t worry, it’ll stop again in a minute.”

The car edged on as Stanton House came into view.

“Well, there it is,” Brock said as Laura pulled the car to a stop.

“Not the prettiest of country houses, is it?” Laura said.

“No,” Brock agreed. “They’ll probably tidy it up a bit when it becomes a hotel.”

“Is that still going to happen though?”

“No idea now. Maybe David Susswich can talk his father around now that Helen isn’t in the picture.”

“Which would give him a pretty good motive,” Laura said.

“Funnily enough, Sherlock,” Brock said, “we have thought of that.”

Laura punched him on the arm before putting the car into gear.

“Come on then, let’s grab a curry on the way home and see if some spice can get this baby on the way. I’m sick of feeling like my skin’s not big enough for my body.”

She swung the car around and the engine screamed again, this time ending in a loud crack, and a puff of black smoke billowed from the front as the car jerked to a stop.

Laura swore and hit the steering wheel.

“Are we even going to bother lifting the bonnet and having a look? Or shall we not pretend to know anything about cars and just call the recovery company?”

Brock grumbled as he pulled his phone from his pocket and then swore when he saw the screen.

“What is it?” Laura asked.

“I forgot, I don’t get reception at the house.”

Laura pulled her phone out and frowned at the lack of bars.

“Do you know, it’s never occurred to me that us both being on the same network isn’t a great idea until now. You’ll have to walk up to the house.”

“I’ve told you! I can’t go up to the house!” Brock protested. “It would not look good. I’ll have to go back to the village.”

“That will take ages!” Laura protested. “If you think I’m sitting in this car waiting for you to go all the way there and back.” She huffed, opened her door, and hauled herself out with difficulty.

“Where are you going?” Brock said, getting out of the car as well.

“Well, I was going to walk to the house, but I guess I don’t need to now.” She pointed down the driveway towards the house, where a Range Rover was approaching. “Oh, and there’s probably something else you should know,” she said calmly.

“What?” Brock asked, squinting at the approaching vehicle.

“My water’s just broke.”

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CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Anderson pulled the car into the car park of The Finch and turned to Poole, who was on the phone. He could just about hear the high-pitched whine of the coroner's voice from the speaker as Poole listened intently.

"I don't care how likely it is, I just want to know if it's possible," Poole said, his voice strangely different to Anderson's ear. There was an edge to it that was not normally there, as though his usual light tone were wrapped around stone.

"Thank you," he said, hanging up and climbing out of the car.

"Are you going to explain what's going on?" Anderson said, following him.

"Not yet," Poole said, marching towards the pub. "It's just a hunch right now."

They entered the pub and made straight for the bar, waiting at one end as Bob Canter served a customer. When done, he made his way over to them.

"How can I help you two gents?" The landlord gave a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"We need to speak to Vanessa," Poole said.

"Why?"

“It’s about the case,” Poole began, but Bob cut him off before he could continue.

“No,” he said, one hand held up in front of him. “You’ve already had me in just because of my past; you’re not putting this on her as well.”

“I don’t think she was involved in the murders,” Poole said quickly. “But we need to speak to her.”

Bob’s lips pursed as he stared back at them. Poole was about to try a different tactic when Anderson spoke.

“Your menu,” he said, picking up one of the printed sheets that were stacked on top of the bar. “Rabbit, pheasant, oh?” He paused, looking up in surprise. “I see you’ve added wood pigeon now?”

“Yeah,” Bob said, looking slightly uneasy.

“After we had lunch here the other day, I looked up where you might get produce like that, and none of them had heard of you.”

Bob laughed. “Well, you obviously didn’t speak to the one we use, did you?”

“Obviously.” Anderson smiled. “And who is that?”

“I can’t remember the name of the place off the top of my head,” Bob said.

“Listen,” Anderson said, leaning towards him and lowering his voice. “I don’t know if you know this, but you need a special licence and insurance and things to sell meat from animals that you catch yourself.”

“Catch myself?! I’m a born and bred Londoner, mate. How would I go about doing that?!”

“Well,” Anderson continued, “not you exactly, but a friend. Doesn’t John Pike often meet you here quite early in the morning? It would be a shame to drag him into an investigation on where your meat comes from, especially when his son has just died.”

Bob’s face reddened.

“All right, you’ve made your point,” he said through gritted teeth. “But I still don’t understand how Vanessa can help—she’s already told you everything she knows.”

“When did she get her hair cut?” Poole said.

This comment, coming out of the blue in the midst of the rest of the conversation, caused both men to turn to him in complete confusion.

“Her hair?” Bob said slowly.

“Yes!” Poole said, somewhat exasperated. “The night before Helen Susswich was murdered, Vanessa had long hair. When I saw her the next morning, it was cut short. When did she get it done?”

“She did it herself that night,” Bob answered. “She’d been going on about it for ages and that night she’d had a drink and just did it, silly cow. Even got me to tidy up the back for her.”

“So, she had this done that night, after everyone had gone? The pub was shut up?”

“Yes! Are you going to tell me what this is about?”

“Where is she, Bob?” Poole said pleadingly. “We need to talk to her.”

“Everything all right, Dad?” Vanessa said, appearing from the door at the far end of the bar and making her way over to them, a questioning look on her face.

“Vanessa,” Poole said, “when you went to Stanton House on the morning that Helen Susswich was killed, was your hair short?”

She frowned and turned to her father.

“It’s OK,” Bob said.

She turned back to eye the two officers before answering.

“Yeah, I cut it the night before. It had been driving me mad and I thought it would be a nice surprise for David.”

“And when you were at the house,” Poole continued, “what rooms were you in, what were you doing?”

“Are you trying to get a black eye?” Bob snarled, slamming his hands on the bar and leaning across at Poole.

“I’m not some pervert asking for details of her sex life,” Poole snapped, “I need to know where she was standing!” He turned back to Vanessa. “I need you to think hard. Did you stand in front of a window?”

“A window?” Vanessa said, her cheeks flushing. “How did you...?” She trailed off, her eyes darting between the three men and finally settling on her father.

“Dad, can you go clean some glasses or something?”

Bob Canter’s face went through a range of emotions in a short space of time, but settled on one of embarrassment and shuffled off, grumbling.

When he’d left, Vanessa’s face turned to the two officers with a twinkle in her eye.

“There’s a big bay window on the second floor, it’s got a padded bench that we like...” She trailed off, smiling.

Anderson made a strange noise at the back of his throat and Poole saw him redden out of the corner of his eye.

“One more thing,” Poole asked. “Were you facing out of the window or into the house?”

“Into the house.” She shrugged and shook her head. “What is all this about?”

“If I’m right,” Poole said, “you’ll find out in time.” He turned from the bar and headed for the door with Anderson following close behind.

“Tell me what’s going on right now,” Anderson demanded as soon as they’d stepped out into the daylight.

Poole stopped and turned to him. “Stuart Pike, think about how he was killed.”

“I heard you say on the phone, you asked if someone could have thrown a rock at him rather than him hitting his head on one when he fell.”

“Exactly, and apparently it’s possible.”

“What’s that got to do with Vanessa and David Susswich being in a window?!” Anderson shouted, his arms flying upwards in frustration.

“First,” said Poole, “think about who could have made a throw like that with the stone. You were at that Aunt Sally match too, you know.”

He waited until he saw realisation crawl across Anderson’s face and then headed for the car.

“Come on, I’ll tell you the rest on the way.”

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CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Anderson slowed the car as they both peered out the window on their left at the estate car that was parked there.

“That’s definitely their car,” Poole said quietly. “They got it recently ready for when the baby comes.”

“Then where are they?” Anderson asked.

“No idea. More to the point, why the hell would they be here?”

“The chief must have been following up on something to do with the case.” Anderson shrugged.

“No, you don’t understand. Brock doesn’t drive. If their car is here, Laura must have driven him.”

“His wife?” Anderson said in alarm. “Isn’t she pregnant?”

“Yep,” Poole said. “Come on, let’s go down to the house. They must be there, and if they are...” He trailed off, and the two of them shared a look that was heavy with meaning before jumping back into the car and setting off down the drive.

A light breeze whipped leaves around the driveway in front of the house where a Land Rover sat askew, as though someone had left it in a hurry. They shared another glance before running up the steps and through the half-open door of the hall.

“Hello?” Poole called into the hallway as he pushed the door back on its hinges. There was no reply other than the slight echo of his voice in the large space. He moved further into the space and called again, this time getting a response.

“I’m in the study,” the unmistakable, despite being muffled, voice of Patrick Susswich called back.

They headed to the right of the hallway, following the direction of the voice until they came to a doorway half open on their right. Anderson pushed it open, and they stepped into a square room lined with shelves containing dozens of books and assorted objects, giving the place the feel of a small museum. Patrick sat behind a large oak desk to the right of the room, his chin raised as he eyed them. There was a single chair on this side of the desk and a dark, leather, two-seated sofa to the left, positioned in front of the fireplace. The room was dimly illuminated by a number of lamps and by one thin central window like those found in castle turrets.

Laura Brock was lying on the sofa, her husband knelt next to her holding her hand. It was only then that Poole noticed the shotgun that was resting on top of the desk, with Patrick’s hand on the trigger.

“Are you OK, sir?” Poole said.

“We’re fine,” Brock said, standing, his eyes burning with anger, “but Laura has gone into labour and Mr Susswich here is refusing to call an ambulance.”

Poole’s eyes widened as he glanced down at Laura, who was smiling at him through gritted teeth.

“Good timing, eh?” she said weakly.

Poole turned back to Patrick Susswich, asking into the middle of the room in order to place himself between the armed man and the Brocks.

When he had entered the room, Patrick’s eyes had been steely and narrowed; now they were wide in what looked like surprise.

“Is Laura really in labour?” he said hoarsely.

“Of course she bloody is, you idiot!” Brock shouted from behind Poole. Patrick frowned as Anderson joined Poole at his side.

“Mr Susswich,” Anderson said, “I’m afraid we need to ask you some more questions.”

Poole glanced at him, amazed that Anderson thought this was the time to start an interrogation. Then he realised it was a distraction. Hoping to focus the older man on them so the Brocks could leave behind them. Poole knew instantly it wouldn’t work. The room was too small for Patrick not to notice them leaving, and while Brock couldn’t drive either their car or the Land Rover, Laura was in no state to.

The older man gave a small smile, but the expression didn’t seem to reach his eyes. “I thought this was part of some plan,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, the chief inspector turning up on my drive with a pregnant woman.” He shook his head again and Poole realised what he meant.

“You thought it was part of some plan to get you to confess, or make a mistake somehow.”

Patrick’s eyes grew hard again as his lips pursed.

“After your meeting with Henry Chambers on the morning of your wife’s murder,” Anderson continued, still set on routine questioning. “Did you come straight back here?”

“I walked in the grounds a little before returning,” Patrick answered.

“Did this walk include you going into the woods?”

“No,” Patrick answered.

Anderson paused and turned to Poole, waiting for him to take the lead.

Poole was thinking furiously. They had no evidence to support his theory, nothing concrete. He would have to goad the man.

“Can I tell you what I think happened?” he said, folding his arms.

Patrick frowned. “If you have a theory on how my wife died, I would like to hear it,” he answered.

Poole nodded and then continued.

“Right from the start, your wife’s murder appeared premeditated. Someone knew her routine enough to know she would be in the woods at that time of morning, and had made sure they were there waiting.”

“Anyone in the village knew Helen’s walking route of a morning,” Patrick answered flatly.

“They did,” Poole nodded, “which made it even more likely that it was premeditated. The killer would have known that anyone would have known that, and so they’d be sure of creating as many suspects as possible. There’s just one problem with it all,” Poole said, noticing that Anderson had wandered across to look at some paintings on the wall on his right.

“And what was that?” Patrick asked.

“That your wife’s murder wasn’t premeditated at all.”

There was a thick silence as Poole watched the older man’s small, rounded eyes dart towards where Anderson was still studying the various pictures, moving towards the desk.

“Ah, so it was the work of some random lunatic?” Patrick said.

“Oh no,” Poole answered, “not at all. A murder was planned, just not the murder of your wife. I think you went to the meeting with Henry Chambers that morning intending to kill him.”

He stared at the man’s face, trying to get a read on his reaction, but it was blank and unblinking.

“I think you took a stick from the Aunt Sally game to that field in order to kill him for defrauding you over the golf course plans which never materialised. You took the Aunt Sally stick because you knew of Bob Canter’s past and thought he’d be the perfect person to blame afterwards. No doubt you had planned to spin us a tale about how you knew there had been animosity between them, or something along those lines.”

There was a short moment of silence, only punctuated by a soft moan from Laura and Brock muttering words of comfort, before Patrick answered in a tight voice, his lips a barely moving thin line.

“All nonsense.”

“But then something happened,” Poole said, ignoring him, “something changed your mind about going through with your plan. I can’t say whether you lost your nerve and couldn’t go through with it, or if you just realised that the whole idea was half-baked and that you’d never get away with it. For some reason, though, you didn’t try to kill Henry Chambers that morning. You had the meeting with him as planned, presumably demanded that he either return your money or at least show some progress on the project. Then he left, and you walked back towards the woods. Now why would you walk back towards the woods, and not to your house? I think it was because that was where you’d left the Aunt Sally stick at the last moment when you had decided not to kill Chambers.

“You didn’t realise, but the Barretts were in the woods that morning. They heard someone coming from the heath and then heading off towards Stanton House. I think you picked up the stick from the side of the path where you’d left it, walked further into the woods towards the house and then tossed it into the bushes to make sure no one would find it.”

Patrick Susswich stood up from his chair, the shotgun waving between Poole and Anderson, who now stood to Patrick’s left.

“Stupid of me to suspect some kind of trick, but you hear rumours of the police trying to frame people, don’t you? I think I’d better go and call that ambulance now, don’t you?”

“Don’t worry,” Poole said, pulling his phone from his pocket, “I can do it.”

“No!” shouted Patrick suddenly, then his shoulders slumped as he repeated the word with a soft sigh. “No, I’m afraid I’ll have to take your phone,” he said to Poole, pointing the gun at him. “And yours.” He gestured at Anderson. “Place them on the desk.”

Poole looked down at his phone, trying to think through options. If they handed over their phones, they would have no way of calling for help, but

they wouldn't be much use if they were shot. That said, a shotgun could only fire twice before needing to be reloaded. That meant that even if Patrick shot both him and Anderson, Brock would be able to tackle him. He needed more time.

Laura gave another moan from behind him. Time was running out.

"That could have been it that day, couldn't it?" Poole said. "You had decided at the last minute that you couldn't go through with murdering Henry Chambers and were heading home. Perhaps you even thought you'd meet your wife as she set out for her dog walk? Maybe you planned to confess to her what you had almost done? Instead, though, you reached the hall. At least, you reached the driveway outside. I expect some movement caught your eye and caused you to look up to the second-floor bay window."

"Stop it!" Patrick screamed, as though Poole had touched a heated poker to his arm.

"You saw something that tore your world apart," Poole continued. "You saw your son and your wife in the window, only this time they weren't arguing. Quite the opposite, in fact. I can only imagine what it must have felt like at that moment. Your wife and your son, having an affair behind your back."

"It wasn't her!" Patrick snarled, then repeated with a sob, "It wasn't her."

"No," Poole sighed. "It wasn't. I imagine you were too shocked to confront them, so you staggered back into the woods without really thinking about what you were doing." Patrick was staring up towards the ceiling now, his eyes filled with tears.

"At some point, though, that changed. You still had the stick that would tie any murder to Bob Canter, who, with his criminal record, would be a handy prime suspect. You knew roughly where you'd thrown it and headed back there, and it wasn't long before Helen arrived on her usual dog walk."

“Stop it,” Patrick said weakly.

“When you saw her on the path, you called her over to where you were in the woods.”

“Stop it!” shouted Patrick.

“And you hit her over the head.”

Patrick fired the shotgun upward as he roared at Poole to stop again. Plaster burst from the ceiling where the shot landed, clouding the room in a fine powder as the larger chunks crashed to the floor.

Patrick lowered the gun to Poole’s head.

“You’ve got one more shot before you need to reload,” Poole said. “I suggest you shoot Anderson over there, he’s bigger than me.”

“What?!” Anderson said, causing Patrick to swivel the gun towards him on his left.

“It just makes sense.” Poole shrugged. “You’re bigger than me. That makes you more of a threat when the last shot fires and you rush him, and also makes you an easier target to hit.”

“You’re the one accusing him of murdering his own wife,” Anderson said. “If anyone is going to get shot here, it should be you. Also, you’re the most annoying.”

“Most annoying?” Poole shouted as he took a step towards Anderson. “Why don’t you say that to my face rather than hiding behind this man’s shotgun?”

Anderson moved towards him as well until they were both face to face on the other side of the desk from Patrick, where the gun now wavered uncertainly.

“OK,” Anderson replied, staring at Poole with fierce eyes. “I think you’re the most annoying person I’ve ever had the misfortune to work with.” He turned to Patrick. “I mean, just look at his face! Even that’s annoying!”

Patrick looked at Poole, frowning in bewilderment, as Anderson's arm whipped out and knocked the barrel of the gun upwards, causing Patrick to fire again and punch a hole into the ceiling. As plaster poured down over the desk, both officers dived across to pull Patrick down face first onto the wooden surface and push his arms behind his back.

Poole exhaled a large breath and then smiled at Anderson.

"Nice work on catching on to my distraction," he said.

"Distraction?" Anderson frowned.

"With the whole 'annoying' thing," Poole said.

"Oh," Anderson said in surprise. "That was a distraction? I was just speaking the truth."

Poole was about to fire back, but then caught the glint in Anderson's eye at the same time, one side of his mouth tugged into a smile.

Poole laughed and shook his head. "Bloody hell."

Anderson was laughing too now, as they slid awkwardly across the desk until they were both behind the now silent Patrick. The adrenaline and surreal nature of the last few minutes evaporating into a giddy high that had them both giggling like schoolboys, until a voice from the doorway broke the spell.

"Will you two stop bloody flirting and call an ambulance!" Brock shouted from behind them.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

“Forty-five minutes?!” Brock shouted, his face white with panic at the estimated arrival time of the ambulance.

“There’s been a big accident on the other side of Bexford.” Poole shrugged.

“You know you’re supposed to be a calming influence on the woman actually about to give birth, right?” Laura said through gritted teeth.

“Right, right,” Brock said, kneeling beside her again.

“We’d be quicker just taking her in our car,” Poole said. “Let’s get her up.”

Laura gave a short cry, shortly followed by Brock, who was staring down at the hand she was holding in horror. Despite her hand being much smaller than his, she had managed to squeeze hard enough to turn his a bright purple.

When the contraction passed, she turned on Poole.

“Firstly, can you stop talking about me like I’m not bloody here? And secondly, I’m not making it to the car, let alone hospital, this baby is coming now.”

The three men exchanged terrified glances.

“Hot water and towels,” Poole said suddenly.

“What?” Brock asked.

“That’s what they say on TV, isn’t it? You need hot water and towels.”

“What for?” Brock asked.

“I don’t know!” Poole said, throwing his hands into the air.

“Bloody hell,” Brock said in a hollow voice.

“I’ve delivered quite a few lambs,” Anderson said.

They all turned to him and he fidgeted on the spot.

“What?” Poole said, sure he had misheard him.

“I’ve delivered lambs,” Anderson said, slightly more firmly now. “I imagine the basic principles are the same.”

“Basic principles?!” Brock cried. “My baby won’t have four legs for starters!”

“Then it should be easier.” Anderson shrugged.

“When have you delivered lambs?!” Poole asked in disbelief.

“I grew up on a farm,” Anderson answered, as though this was common knowledge.

“Can you stop interrogating the man and let him get on with it!” Laura shouted.

Brock moved around the sofa and squared up in front of Anderson.

“Do you think you can do this?” he asked in a low voice.

Anderson took a deep breath.

“I think I’m your best bet,” he answered.

Laura shouted several swear words so loudly that all three men jumped.

“I’ll get the hot water and towels,” Poole said quickly before heading for the door. It was only then that he noticed Patrick Susswich, still sitting at his desk. In the sudden excitement, he had completely forgotten him. He was staring out of the small window with a glazed expression, his handcuffed hands resting on the desk. He was no threat now. There was another round of swearing from behind him and he rushed out of the door towards the kitchen he had interviewed David Susswich in. It seemed a lifetime ago now.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

Poole hadn't been able to find any blankets, but he had taken every tea towel he could find in the kitchen while he had waited for the kettle to boil. They were jacked under his left arm now, while the kettle was in his right. He jogged back into the hallway and came skidding to a halt on the smooth, wood floor as a huge thud smacked into the door of the study. Dropping the kettle and towels, he tried to make sense of what he was seeing and hearing.

There was another huge bang on the door as he heard his name being called from the other side. It was then that he noticed the smoke seeping out from under the door.

He ran to it and turned the handle, but it was locked.

"Poole?" he heard Brock shout from the other side, "Are you there?"

"Yes! What's going on?!"

"He started a bloody fire!" Brock shouted. "I can't get the door open, it opens inwards and it's about a foot thick!"

"Hold on!" Poole shouted back, "And stand back!"

He took a few steps back and then charged at the door, hitting it with his shoulder as hard as he could. He bounced off it as though it were concrete.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" A voice came from the front doorway at the end of the hall. Poole turned to see David Susswich staring

at him with a look of confused fury.

“Your father is trapped in his study and there’s a fire in there!” he shouted, deciding it was best not to mention that his father was also under arrest for murder.

David’s eyes widened in panic as he too saw the smoke seeping from the bottom of the door. He rushed to the side of the door, where he picked up the stone statue that stood on a tall plinth and placed it on the floor.

“Help me with this,” he said as he tried to lift the heavy plinth. Poole ran across to him and between them, they heaved the long cylinder up and onto its side. Each of them holding an end, they walked it across towards the study until they were five feet from the wooden door.

“On three,” David said from the rear end of the improvised battering ram. “One, two, three!”

They both charged at the door. Although they couldn’t build up much speed carrying the heavy object, it crunched into the middle of the wooden door, which flung open as the lock splintered out through the wood.

Smoke billowed out and Poole charged in, coughing as the smoke wrapped around him. Brock appeared in front of him, carrying his wife in his arms as though she was a newborn.

“Are you OK?” Poole asked urgently.

“We need to get out of here,” Anderson said from Poole’s left, and he turned to see him holding a screaming newborn, still attached to its mother by the umbilical cord. They hurried out into the corridor as David Susswich called for his father between coughs.

“There!” Poole shouted, pointing at a prone figure on the ground to his right. They each took a leg and dragged the unconscious man towards the doorway.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

“Come on,” Poole said, “let me have a turn with her.”

“Never,” Sanita replied. “I’m just going to keep hold of her forever. She’s too cute to let go of.”

“Well, I’m to going to argue that,” Poole said as he brushed the back of his finger over the impossibly soft cheek of the fresh addition to the Brock family.

“Have you chosen a name yet?” Poole asked as Sanita finally relinquished her hold on the newborn and Poole took her in his arms.

“Yes,” Laura replied, “Lilly.”

“Lovely,” Poole said. He stared down as Lilly stretched in a tiny yawn, making his heart melt.

The door to the small room opened. Anderson shuffled in looking awkward and embarrassed in equal measure.

“Um, hello,” he said.

“Anderson,” Brock smiled, “this is my wife Laura.” He gestured to the bed where Laura sat up slightly and smiled.

“Come over here,” she said.

Anderson lumbered over to the side of the bed and almost jumped when Laura reached out and took his hand in hers.

“We’ll never be able to thank you enough for what you did today,” she said, tears in her eyes. Anderson opened his mouth and then closed it again. “And it’s good to finally meet you at the right end,” she said with a smile.

Anderson turned a deep scarlet and Brock pulled him away.

“Bloody hell, Laura, you’ll be giving the lad a complex for life.”

Sanita, who had been trying to stifle a giggle at this, failed.

“So,” Brock said, turning to Anderson and Poole. “Are you going to tell me what happened with the case?”

“Hold on!” Laura said as she took Lilly back from Sanita. “We are not discussing a murder case in here. Guy,” she said, turning to him, “can you take Sam to the pub and do the whole ‘wetting the baby’s head’ thing?”

“What?!” Brock said. “I’m not leaving you both here!”

“Oh, it’s only for a couple of hours. We’re staying in overnight anyway, so we’re being looked after.”

“Overnight?” Poole asked, his face a picture of concern.

“Oh, it’s just a precaution,” Laura said, waving her free hand dismissively. “It’s not often they see a baby born in a room full of smoke, and they just want to be doubly sure her lungs are OK. Which they are,” she said, looking at Brock meaningfully.

“I know, I know,” he said, putting his hands up defensively.

“In any case,” she continued, “it’s a tradition, isn’t it? You’ve solved a case, you go for a drink. That’s what you do. Now there’s double the traditional reason, wetting the baby’s head. So take him off and tell him everything so he can focus on us, will you?”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

“In a strange way, it was actually Laura who helped me realise what we’d been missing in the case,” Poole said before taking a generous sip of his beer. Poole, Brock, Anderson and Sanita were gathered around a corner table in the Mop & Bucket pub, drinks in hand.

“Laura?” Brock said. “What’s she got to do with it?”

“Well,” Poole continued. “Not her, but someone I thought was her.” He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “Anderson and I were in here, going over the case, when I saw a woman outside through the window. She had her back to me and for a moment I thought it was Laura. Then she turned to the side and I saw that actually, she looked nothing like her. She just had the same haircut. It was then I realised that a haircut was at the center of all this.”

“A haircut?” Sanita said flatly.

“Yes!” Poole said. “Listen, we kept thinking that Helen Susswich’s murder was premeditated. Someone had taken a stick from the Aunt Sally game with intent. There could really only be three reasons for doing that. One, that it was taken out of convenience by someone at the pub. Two, it was symbolic somehow, or three, it was designed to implicate Bob Canter, who made a decent suspect with his criminal record.”

“OK,” Brock said, “so which one was it in the case of Helen Susswich’s murder?”

“None of them,” Poole said, smiling. “That stick was taken to implicate Bob Canter, but the target wasn’t Helen, it was Henry Chambers.”

“Who Patrick Susswich met with that morning,” Anderson said.

“Exactly,” Poole continued. “Patrick had realised he was being swindled by Chambers and had taken the stick the evening before their meeting. He didn’t go through with it though. Whether he backed out because he just couldn’t go through with it or because he decided he would get caught, I don’t know, but he left the stick in the woods and went to meet Henry Chambers without it.” He took another sip of beer. “Now this is where it gets interesting. Helen had left the house as well. In fact, she’d headed up to the heath. Maybe she’d realised what Patrick was planning on doing, or maybe she just wanted her own word with Henry Chambers. Either way, she left the house with her dog and Vanessa Canter watched her go. Once she was out of the way, Vanessa made her way to the house to hook up with David Susswich and in particular, surprise him with her new haircut.”

“A new haircut that was a short, messy bob, just like Helen Susswich’s,” Anderson added.

There was a short pause as the others stared at him.

“I didn’t know you were such an expert on hair?” Sanita said.

“Probably learnt it in the same place as he learned to play Aunt Sally,” Poole said with a grin. “Anyway, Patrick Susswich had gone back into the woods, picked up the stick from the path where he’d left it and threw it deeper into the woods, before heading back to the house.”

“Where Vanessa had now arrived for her rendezvous with David Susswich,” Brock said.

“Yes,” Poole said, “and that’s when everything went wrong. As he got to the house, he saw in the large upper window the back of a woman with

a,” he nodded to Anderson, “a short, messy blonde bob, and she was with his son.”

“He thought it was Helen,” Sanita said.

“Yes.” Poole confirmed. “Think about it, he didn’t know his son was seeing Vanessa Canter, and even if he did, he wouldn’t have known she had chopped all her hair off the night before. His wife wouldn’t normally have left for her dog walk at that time, so he thought she was at home, with his son.”

“He didn’t know she’d left early to follow him to his meeting with Henry Chambers,” Brock said, nodding.

“You can only imagine how he felt. He’d just had another meeting with Chambers where he’d been told the same old tale. The deal was happening, his money was safe. He hadn’t been able to go through with killing him, but now he was in a rage. He probably walked back into the woods in a daze; maybe he didn’t even realise he had walked back to the spot where he’d thrown the Aunt Sally stick. There are thousands of sticks in those woods, but something drew him back to that one, and that spot.”

“And then his wife came along,” Brock said.

Poole nodded. “She’d walked down from the heath where she’d spoken to Henry Chambers. If Patrick had been thinking clearly, he would have realised she was coming from the opposite direction of the house, and that might have been enough for him to question whether it was his wife he had seen in the window or not. Instead, he was filled with a sudden rage. He called out to his wife, who was obviously surprised to find him there. Patrick told us the short conversation they had. Even that was unlucky—it all could have been different if they hadn’t got their wires crossed. As she made her way from the path and into the trees to where he was standing, he shouted at her that he had seen her, that he knew what she had done.”

“And she thought he was talking about her following him and speaking to Henry Chambers herself?” Sanita asked.

“Yes,” Anderson confirmed, “unfortunately she answered that it was his own fault, as he clearly wasn’t up to the job.”

There was a pause as the table’s occupants collectively processed how this would have sounded to someone who thought they had just seen their partner cheating.

“And so he hit her,” Brock said.

“I’m just glad the dog got away,” Poole said.

“He tried to hurt the dog?!” Brock exclaimed, as this was possibly an even worse crime.

“He was still swearing about it when we interviewed him. He had always hated it apparently and tried to give it a whack as well, but it ran off. When it arrived back at the house, his son realised something might have happened to Helen, so he had to go along with phoning us. I think he’d planned to imply she’d run off or something and maybe hidden the body later, probably keeping the Aunt Sally stick to use to implement Bob Canter if he could.”

“And you realised all of this from seeing someone you thought was my wife?” Brock said, clearly impressed.

“Actually, it wasn’t just that. It was something Anderson had said about Stuart Pike being killed.”

“Oh?” Brock said, looking at Anderson.

“He’s being generous,” he said with a small smile. “I didn’t realise it had anything to do with the case, I was just being flippant.”

“So what was it?” Sanita asked impatiently.

“Stuart Pike headed out the morning he died with his father’s shotgun. Why?”

“Because he was meeting someone he was afraid of?” Sanita asked. “Someone he was blackmailing?”

“Exactly, he was blackmailing the murderer and was obviously worried about meeting them. That’s what he was doing, meeting to arrange

payment. Someone managed to hit him over the head before he even got a shot off, took the gun off him and shot him with it. Anderson made the good point that whoever it was must have been able to get close to him without raising alarm bells, or have a throwing arm like a piston.”

“I was joking,” Anderson said, grinning now.

“But you were right,” Poole continued. “When I looked out of this pub window and thought I saw Laura, it reminded me of when I’d looked through the window of The Finch and thought I’d seen the ghost of Helen Susswich, until she turned around and I realised it was Vanessa in her new haircut. Then I thought of Vanessa going to Stanton House that morning to meet David, and that comment by Anderson came to mind. Patrick Susswich was a brilliant Aunt Sally player. I know he’s getting on a bit, but his throwing arm is something else. We saw it when he played Aunt Sally.”

“Best I’ve seen,” Anderson agreed.

“He’d agreed to meet Stuart Pike and pay him off, as Stuart had been out that morning and had seen Patrick in the woods. Patrick knew he would never be rid of him if he didn’t act, so before Stuart arrived for their meeting, Patrick hid. As Stuart arrived, Patrick threw a large rock, hard at the side of the man’s head. He went down hard and Patrick stepped out, shot him, and then got home as fast as he could across the fields.”

There was a pause in proceedings as Anderson left to get another round of drinks.

“So, do you think it might work with you two?” Brock said to Poole once he’d left.

“Sir!” Poole said in mock outrage, “My girlfriend is sitting right here!”

“You idiot,” Sanita said as she punched him on the arm.

“Come on,” Brock said, smiling, “it seems like you two worked well together in the end?”

Poole turned and looked at the large frame of Anderson at the bar. “It might work,” he said grudgingly, “but I’m not sure we’ll ever be friends as

such.”

“Good enough for me,” Brock said, slapping the table.

“Anyway,” Poole said, turning back to him, “I still haven’t heard what happened in the study?”

“Ah,” Brock said, leaning forward. “There, I have a little bone to pick with you.”

“What’s that?” Anderson said as he arrived back with a tray of drinks.

“I was just about to tell Poole here how he owes us one for allowing us to be locked in a room that was on fire.”

“What?!” Poole said. “How was that my fault?!”

“Well, next time you put a murderer in handcuffs and leave them, it’s a good idea to check if they have either the key to the room in their pocket, or access to lighter fluid and paper.”

Poole’s mouth opened as his gaze snapped between Anderson and Brock, who were both looking serious.

“When you left the study to go and get towels and hot water, Patrick got up, walked over to the door and locked it. Then he threw the key out of the window, walked back to his desk where he fished out his lighter, lighter fluid and a load of paper. Then he spread the paper over his wooden desk, covered it in lighter fluid and lit the bloody thing.”

“How did you not notice him doing any of that?!” Poole said, incredulous.

“I’m not sure if you noticed, but we were trying to deliver a baby at the time,” Anderson answered.

“You handcuffed him with me, you left him there too!” Poole protested.

“Yeah,” Brock countered, “but he’s off the hook because he delivered my daughter.”

Poole slumped back in his chair. Only then did he realise that both Brock and Anderson were now grinning, Sanita laughing.

“Oh don’t wind him up,” she said. “You know what he’s like, he’ll be worrying about that for weeks now. Anyway, couldn’t you have got out of the window?”

“Too small,” Anderson answered, “but Poole got us out in the end, with a bit of help from David Susswich.”

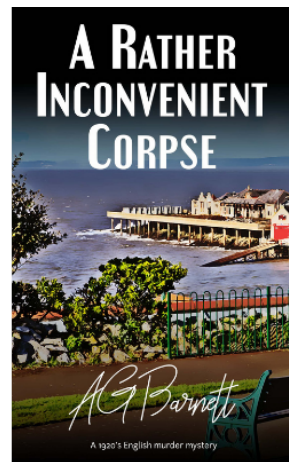
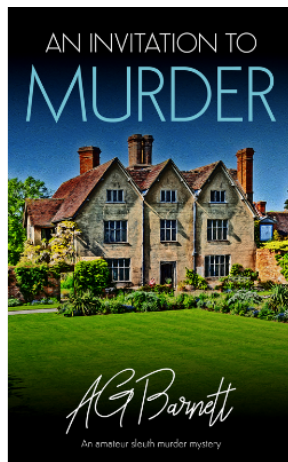
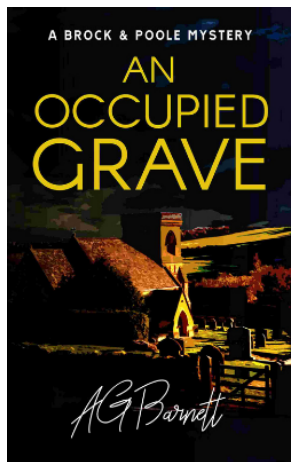
Anyway,” Sanita said. “We’re all caught up now, let’s make this a happy occasion.” She lifted her glass. “To the newest member of the Brock family, Lilly!”

“To Lilly!” they all said, clinking their glasses as Brock beamed.

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